

A GIRL OF SPIRIT

BY

CHARLES GARVICE

AUTHOR OF

"JUST A GIRL," "LOVE DECIDES," "LOVE THE TYRANT," ETC.

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down, Miss Cottie?" said Mrs. Waring, coaxingly. "You've been standing staring out there ever so long, and you'll make your dear eyes ache: they've been tried so much lately."

"I'm all right," said Constance. "I like looking out. Everything in the room here—his room—reminds me—You are right: it is weak and almost wicked to brood and fret. It cannot bring him back; and—there are so many things to be thought of. Do you know—but of course you do—that I may have to leave the Hall? Mr. Crayson has not found any other will, and everything, as well as the Hall and the title, may go to Ralph."

"But he is your cousin, Miss Cottie," said Mrs. Waring, with agitation. "He would not be so cruel or so greedy as to take everything and leave you to face the world quite penniless and unprovided for!"

Cottie shook her head slightly.

"I don't know. Besides"—she paused a moment—"if he were to offer me money, to provide for me, of course I could not take it—I could not allow him to do so. Why should I live on charity, especially the charity of a man whom my father disliked?"

"There *must* be another will somewhere, Miss Cottie," said Mrs. Waring, earnestly, and with a smouldering indignation. "I can't believe that Sir John would leave his only daughter, his only child, a miserable pittance!"

"No, it does seem impossible," assented Constance. "I have not thought much about it, for, compared with my great loss, nothing else seems to matter. My father may have intended to destroy the will which he made when he—he was angry with me, and he was always careless about such matters, about business generally. My poor father!"

The tears sprang to her eyes; for she loved her father,

though she had no particular reason for doing so, seeing that the late lamented Sir John had never cared for anyone but himself, not even for the beautiful girl who had loved him and borne with his imperious and capricious temper, his fits of violent passion, his ineradicable selfishness, and who now mourned for him as if he had been the best father that ever lived.

One should not speak evil of dignities, especially when they are dead : but really one hunts in vain for something to say in praise of the baronet, who had just shuffled off this mortal coil, and had made everybody about him uncomfortable while he had been on it. This, at least, may be said : that the late holder of the historic title, if no better than his long-line of predecessors, had been no worse.

It is true that in his youth he had been a profligate, a gambler, a rowdy ; that in his middle age he had settled down to oppress his tenants and quarrel with his friends, and that, in the closing years of his life, he had become a perfect terror to everyone about him ; but this lurid description would fit all the Desbrooks, and one is constrained to admit that they were a bad lot.

Sometimes, knowing the peculiar characteristics of the family, Cottie trembled for herself and wondered whether she, too, might not be as bad as the rest ; forgetting the gentle mother whose blood ran in her veins, the wife whom Sir John had driven to the churchyard, while her child was indeed but a child.

Now, the only will that had been found was one which Sir John had made in one of his fits of temper and passion, a will by which he left practically everything of which he was possessed to Sir Ralph, the heir to the baronetcy, and actually appointed him the guardian of Constance.

But the thought did not trouble her much ; for when one is young and bowed down by grief, the question of money does not seem of the least importance. Besides, she had, at any rate, inherited the spirit and the pluck for which the Desbrooks were famous ; and she was in perfect health, and full of that noble courage which makes light of poverty.

That she would have to leave the old Hall, every one of whose huge timbers and time-stained stones she loved with an unspeakable love, was very probable, indeed, almost certain ; but, harassing as the thought was, she felt that she could find somewhere to go, some means of supporting herself and the faithful Mrs. Waring, who, she knew, would not leave her.

She lay back in the big chair and closed her eyes ; and Mrs. Waring, stepping softly to her, drew a shawl round her.

"If you could only sleep a little, Miss Cottie," she murmured, tenderly ; but even as she spoke there came a knock at the door, and the butler, in mourning livery, said in the subdued voice which had become customary since the harsh, strident tones of Sir John had been hushed for ever :

"Mr. Crayson wishes to know if you will see him, miss ?"

Mrs. Waring turned half resentfully ; but Constance, putting the shawl from her, said :

"Yes."

Mr. Crayson entered the room. He was a young man, very fair, so fair, indeed, that in certain lights his hair looked white, and he might almost have been mistaken for an Albino ; but the eyes were not red, but a blue of the palest shade. Perhaps he, himself, did not like their colour, for the rather thick lids were nearly

always lowered. He was clean-shaven, because his mouth was rather a good one; that is to say, it was small and well-shaped, and it looked extremely nice while he kept it still and did not smile. When he smiled it was not so pretty; for there was a little droop of the under lip and a little lift of the upper one, revealing the long, canine tooth, which was not altogether pleasant. Probably he knew this, for he did not smile often.

Lycett Crayson was the sole representative of the firm of lawyers which had acted for the Desbrooks for generations. His father, grandfather, great-grandfather, had been the legal advisers to the family. They had belonged to the steady, stolid order of country solicitors. Lycett Crayson was in quite another class. They had been gentlemen, and Lycett's father had tried to make him one; had sent him to Oxford, and had made him a liberal allowance, so that he might associate with other gentlemen; but the old man had failed. Oxford and good society had failed also. Lycett's father had married his cook, a good cook, but a bad woman; and consequently there was a bad strain in Lycett, one of those bad strains which nothing can eradicate.

He came into the room with the soft and noiseless step peculiar to him. His mourning suit of black serge showed up the pallor of his face, his extremely light hair and pale-coloured eyes. He raised his heavy lids for a moment and looked at Constance and then at Mrs. Waring; but it was only for a moment, and no one seeing the look would have guessed that Lycett Crayson loved Sir John's daughter.

"Love" is a big word, and one is sometimes compelled to use it for lack of a more accurate one. Let us say that, next to himself and his own comfort and

A Girl of Spirit

well-being, Lycett Crayson loved Constance Desbrook. It scarcely need be added that he had not declared his love. There is almost as much difference, as wide a gulf, between a girl of Constance's social position and that of Lycett Crayson as there is between a general and a soldier in the ranks, especially when both live in an English country place. In Lycett's eyes Miss Desbrook of the Hall was almost a queen; and Constance regarded Mr. Crayson—whom, by the way, she did not very much like—with that indifference of toleration which is marked by a courtesy more pointed and clearly defined than that with which one treats an equal.

She did not know that this careful courtesy, this half-conscious aloofness, sometimes nearly drove Mr. Lycett Crayson mad: but it did, and there were times when he told himself that he hated her, times when he went out from her presence writhing with wounded self-love and burning with a smouldering resentment.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Miss Desbrook," he said; "but there was something of importance which I wished to see you about."

"Will you not be seated?" said Constance.

He took the chair gladly enough; for he always felt awkward when he was standing before her, with her calm eyes regarding him as if he were miles away.

Mrs. Waring was going out of the room, but Cottie stopped her.

"You need not go," she said.

Lycett Crayson's foot—he had small and pretty feet—shuffled uneasily.

"It is rather—a—private matter, Miss Desbrook," he said.

Mrs. Waring, with a not very friendly glance at him, went out. Cottie leant back and waited. Lycett

Crayson glanced at her furtively, and then, fixing his eyes on the carpet, said :

"I thought I ought to tell you that I have not yet heard from Sir Ralph. I have written four letters, addressing them to his last place of abode, or to his clubs, with the request that they should be forwarded. It is quite possible that he may be out of England. Sir John had held no communication with him for many years; and we at the office have not heard from him for almost as long a time." He paused a moment, then went on in a still lower voice : "So much depends on Sir Ralph—I mean—er—your future, Miss Desbrook. The fact that Sir John made such a will as he has, or, rather, I should say"—he corrected himself quickly, and with a swift glance at the pale, wan face—"that no other will has been found, places you in a position which—which is a most unfortunate one."

Constance looked straight before her without a quiver of the lid or any sign of emotion, and her silence somewhat disconcerted Lycett Crayson.

"I have been going into your affairs very closely and carefully, and I am very sorry to inform you, Miss Desbrook, that if no will in your favour should be found you will have no means, no property, beyond the small income left you by Sir John, and any personal effects, such as jewellery, which you may call absolutely your own. It is very painful for me to have to tell you this; but of course it is my duty, as your solicitor, to prepare you for the immediate consequences of Sir John's strange action—and neglect of his daughter."

At the words the blood rose to Constance's face, her eyes flashed upon the pale ones of the speaker, and her hands, drooping over the side of the chair, closed tightly. But she said nothing, and Lycett Crayson went on :

A Girl of Spirit

"It is my duty to tell you that your cousin, Sir Ralph Desbrook, will be absolute master here, and that he will take nearly the whole of Sir John's money. He might provide for you—"

Constance turned her eyes upon him.

"That contingency need not be considered, Mr. Crayson," she said, quite quietly.

"You would not accept it? Then what will you do?" he asked, with a little catch in his breath.

"What other girls, less strong than I, who are left almost penniless, are compelled to do—earn my living."

He bit his lip, looked first at the carpet, then at her.

"It sounds impossible," he said. "You are quite unfit— You do not know what it means. I—I shrink from the thought, the mere idea, of such a fate for you. I—I—" He rose and, actually trembling with agitation, stammered: "I and mine have watched over the interests of your family for generations. We—we might almost be considered—friends. I—Miss Desbrook—Constance"—he moistened his lips—"I beg of you not to think that I am callous or indifferent to the fact that you are recently bereaved; but the sad circumstances, the terrible position in which you are placed—they must be my excuse for speaking with so little preparation, so abruptly. Will you—will you consider a proposal that I desire, that I am most anxious, to put before you? It is that you will allow me the unspeakable privilege of taking charge of your future."

Constance was looking at him, not with indignation or resentment, but with a kind of faint surprise and amazement. It might almost be said that, for the moment, she did not understand him, though he had

used her Christian name; but at the back of her mind was a suspicion that he had suddenly gone mad.

"I beg your pardon: I don't quite understand," she said, in quite her ordinary tone. "Do you mean that you wish to continue acting as my lawyer, as you acted for my father?"

Lycett Crayson's face went red and his lips twitched.

"Well, yes," he faltered; "but I meant something more. I meant to ask you to let me take charge of your future as a—as a husband takes charge of his wife's. I want you to be—my—wife. I have loved you, Miss Desbrook, for a long time past. Of course, I could not speak— But things are different now. I—perhaps I ought not to say it—but I am a fairly wealthy man. My practice is very large, and is increasing year by year. Of course, I could not offer you such a home as you have been accustomed—"

Constance understood at last. She rose slowly, with a faint tinge of colour in her face; her grey eyes, almost black as was their wont when she was deeply moved, regarding him steadily.

"Please do not say any more, Mr. Crayson," she said, in a low voice, too calm for anger—so calm, indeed, that it cut to his self-love more deeply than any sign of resentment on her part would have done. "I ought to thank you for your offer, and I do so. It is a very kind one. But I do not think you could have seriously expected me to accept it."

His face was crimson, his eyes fell before hers.

"I ought not to have spoken so soon—Sir John's death is so recent—but the circumstances are pressing. Sir Ralph may arrive at any moment. You may have to decide as to your future. You say you could not

accept anything from him: I offer you a home, a lifelong devotion, a loving heart—" •

Constance turned her head aside. She wanted to spare him the anger beginning to glow in her eyes; for, after all, Lycett Crayson could scarcely be expected to understand that his offer was an insult.

"Please say no more," she pleaded. "I could never be your—wife."

She could not help the pause before the word, and he winced as if it were the lash of a whip.

"Perhaps—perhaps you will think it over, Miss Desbrook," he said, his face pallid again. "You are naturally surprised; the difference between us is so great. Oh, I am quite aware of it! But, anyway, I trust you will not permit what I have said to make any difference in our relations; that you will let me serve you to the best of my abilities, as I have served your father."

"Certainly it shall make no difference," said Constance. "Why should it? But indeed I do not know that there will be anything you can do for me. I shall have no need for a solicitor. It is very probable that I shall leave the Hall almost immediately."

"I trust not," he said. "In any case, I hope that you will take no step without consulting me."

"Thank you, Mr. Crayson," said Constance. "I will certainly consult you. I should have done so, even if you had not asked me."

He stood gnawing at his under-lip, and looking from one part of the carpet to another.

"There are one or two other matters, but I will not trouble you with them now. There are some papers I should like to look over in the library. I will go." •

Constance inclined her head, and with a bow—the

lawyer's bow to his client—he turned and left the room.

The light was fading. Constance leant back and gazed at the fire. She was tingling with the humiliation of Lycett Crayson's offer. It seemed like the last straw: that she should seem so helpless, so friendless, that the man should consider her acceptance of his proposal possible!

Mrs. Waring came in, and would have lit the lamp, but Constance stopped her; and Mrs. Waring, taking up some knitting, sat down and worked in silence, for she saw that Constance was in no mood to talk. Presently Constance looked towards the window. Her quick ears had caught the sound of a carriage.

"What was that?" she asked.

Mrs. Waring, not so quick, listened for a moment; then she said:

"It is someone coming up the drive, Miss Cottie."

They heard the clatter of horses' hoofs, the clang of the great bell, the opening of the heavy hall door, the sound of a man's voice; then all was still. Mrs. Waring had risen apprehensively; but Constance still sat quite calm and self-contained.

Presently a servant knocked at the door, and in a tone of suppressed excitement said:

"Sir Ralph Desbrook, miss."

CHAPTER II

SIR RALPH stood with his back to the huge fire of logs in the hall, his legs slightly apart, his head thrown back, his eyes wandering round the family portraits: a notable figure, a notable face. He was still in the pride of youth, his splendid frame well-knit, the fire of strength—strength of will as well as strength of body—in his eyes. Wonderful eyes they were—the Desbrook hazel eyes, with the little bar of red in them which shone in more than one of the faces that looked down upon him from the pictures. That little bar of red grew broader when Sir Ralph was angry, so that the pupil glowed with the colour of a chestnut. He was broad of chest, flat of shoulder, with the limbs of an athlete, the bearing of a soldier; the hands that gripped each other behind his back were of exceptional strength—as strong, indeed, as those of the Russian czar who could double up a rouble between his fingers.

The face was a handsome one, with the Desbrook characteristics of a slightly hooked nose and firm, straight lips. Taken altogether, not a man to pass in a crowd without notice; certainly a man one would prefer to have as a friend rather than as a foe.

The face, tanned by sun and weather, was rather flushed, as if he had been drinking; as he had. Ralph Desbrook had inherited not only the features, and form of his race, but several of its bad qualities;

and it was not without sufficient reason, that his intimates called him Ralph the Ruffian.

And yet at times—whenever he chose, in fact—Ralph could display a courtesy as polished as that of a Talleyrand.

As he looked round the ancient and historic hall which seemed to be full of the spirits of his ancestors, his lips drew together and his brows came down with a frown that was cynical and contemplative, rather than exultant and triumphant. He had not crossed the threshold of Desbrook Hall since he had been turned out of the house for some trivial fault: now he stood here, monarch of all he surveyed.

Hobson, the butler, came down the stairs, and Sir Ralph raised his dark and heavy eyebrows interrogatively.

"Miss Constance will see you presently, Sir Ralph," said Hobson, rather timidly; for the face and figure were both somewhat awe-inspiring. "She told me to tell you, Sir Ralph, that Mr. Crayson, the lawyer, was here."

"Fetch him," said Sir Ralph.

Before Hobson could obey this peremptory order, Lycett Crayson came out of the library.

"Sir Ralph?" he said in his soft voice.

Sir Ralph nodded.

"How do you do? You are the Mr. Crayson who wrote to me, I suppose? I only got your letter this morning; just come back from wolf-shooting: North America. Sorry to hear of my uncle's death; thought he'd have lasted for another twenty years. How is my cousin, Miss Constance?"

Lycett Crayson had run his eye over the tall figure,

the strong, almost stern face, and now stood with lowered lids.

"Miss Desbrook is well in health, Sir Ralph," he replied; "but of course she has suffered very deeply—is suffering still; but she will, no doubt, be able to see you presently—"

"So she says," said Sir Ralph. He threw himself into one of the big chairs and stretched out his long legs to the fire. "Won't you sit down? Please ring the bell first."

Lycett Crayson obeyed, and Hobson appeared.

"Bring us something to drink," said Sir Ralph. "Whisky and soda." He leant back, staring at the fire until the drink was brought and he had taken a draught; and then he said: "What is this about the will, Mr. Crayson? Rather a strange business, isn't it?"

Lycett Crayson, sitting rather meekly, with his legs crossed, on the other side of the fire, replied in his low voice:

"The only will that has been found, Sir Ralph, is, as I told you, one which Sir John made four years ago. By it he bequeathes to you practically the whole of his property."

"Devilish rum that!" exclaimed Sir Ralph. "Why, the old man and I had not spoken, had not met, since I was a boy. Ah, yes, I remember meeting him once at Ascot; and, by George, he scowled at me as if he hated me; as he did! And you mean to tell me that he has left everything to me—nothing to my cousin Constance, his daughter?"

"Scarcely anything, Sir Ralph," answered Lycett Crayson.

"But, good Lord, why? I tell you he hated me! What was the matter with the girl?"

Lycett Crayson touched his lips with his tongue.

"Sir John was a man of peculiar temper, Sir Ralph—"

"By George, don't I know it?"

"He was in the habit of giving way to fits of passion, during which he lost all control over himself and his actions. He quarrelled even with Miss Constance, who was a most devoted daughter, and is a—a most amiable young lady."

Sir Ralph shot a glance at the low-voiced speaker—a glance which seemed to indicate that Sir Ralph did not altogether approve of this unsolicited testimonial.

"Sir John must have made this will," continued Lycett Crayson, "on the occasion of one of these outbursts of temper. Indeed, that he did so is quite evident from the fact that he left Miss Constance the nominal sum of twenty-five pounds per annum, and appointed you her guardian."

"Her guardian?" echoed Sir Ralph, his eyebrows shooting upwards, and then coming down with a frown. "Her guardian?"

"It is more than possible that Sir John may have intended to destroy this will. He may have thought that he had done so, and had intended to make another, in which Miss Constance should be properly provided for."

"Of course he did," said Sir Ralph. "He couldn't have been in a temper for four years, and when he was in his right mind again he couldn't have been such a confounded fool as to leave such a will as this knocking about. I'll bet you a hundred to nothing there's another and a proper one somewhere!"

Lycett Crayson shook his head.

"I think not, Sir Ralph. I have searched everywhere. My father drew up the will that we have

found ; it was left in our office safe. If Sir John had made another, a later one, my father would have drawn it up also. But apart from that, I have made careful search in every likely and unlikely place. I can find no other will, and I am forced to conclude that Sir John, putting off his intention from day to day, like many other men, put it off too long. He died suddenly, quite suddenly, as I told you in my letter."

Ralph nodded.

"Quite so. I see. There wasn't any time for him to do anything. Yes ; I always thought he'd go off in a flash. Like the rest of us, he went the pace, and *lived* while he did live. He was a fine old chap. Lord, how we used to quarrel ! I had the knack of waking that temper of his ; and my own, even as a boy, was never a very sound sleeper, so I used to give it him back and check him when he raved. Now he's left me everything, bar this paltry five-and-twenty pounds a year ; that was his way of insulting her. By George ! I wish he were here now ; I should like to give him a piece of my mind. Left everything to me ! I can scarcely believe it even yet." He rose to his full height, towering above the pale-faced Lycett, who was watching him with a covert intensity. "Here ! show me where he used to spend most of his time ; where he'd be likely to put a will."

Lycett Crayson rose. "Sir John spent a great deal of his time in the library."

"Come on, then ; we'll go and look there," said Sir Ralph, refilling his glass, and drinking the contents at a draught.

He followed Lycett Crayson across the hall, his firm step sounding plainly on the polished floor, and they went into the library.

"Sir John kept most of his papers here," said Lycett, unlocking the safe, "and it was, of course, the first place I searched. There was no will here."

He touched the various papers and deeds with his slim fingers as Sir Ralph nodded; then he looked round the room, and his eyes rested on an old bureau.

"Of course you looked in that thing?"

Lycett smiled.

"Oh, of course, Sir Ralph. I have examined every inch of it. Indeed, you may say that there is no place, no nook or corner, that I have not searched."

Sir Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"He may have put it in one of those books," he said, nodding towards the shelves.

"He might have done so," assented Lycett. "But I have had every book down, and have shaken them, and otherwise examined all of them. No; I am convinced there is no other will than the one in your favour. If Sir John had made one, there was no earthly reason why he should conceal it. When his fits of passion were over, he was generally sorry for any excesses of which he had been guilty while they lasted."

Sir Ralph stared hard at the carpet.

"And my cousin—she knows of this precious state of things?"

"Yes, I have informed her," said Lycett.

"Humph!" said Sir Ralph. "Nice for her! But," he added, under his breath, so low that Lycett did not hear him, "I suppose she's not old enough to quite understand what it means." He yawned slightly. He had been drinking on the way, had had a "hot" evening the night before, and had also had two drinks since he had arrived at the house. "It's about dinner-time, isn't it? Perhaps my cousin will see me afterwards. I'll go

A Girl of Spirit

up and change. I didn't bring a man, for I really didn't know whether I was going to stay."

"I will send Sir John's man up to you, Sir Ralph."

Sir Ralph nodded, and strolled back to the hall, kicked the logs into a blaze, and bent his long back to pat Constance's deer-hound, which stood on the tiger-skin regarding the newcomer with solemn and critical eyes.

"Hallo, old chap!" said Sir Ralph, in his deep voice. "You're one of the right sort, I can see. Old or young? Let's look at your grinders."

He caught the dog's muzzle softly but firmly, and opened his jaws. Most persons would have considered the action somewhat risky, for the dog was a powerful one, and did not look as if he would put up with liberties; but he suffered Sir Ralph to inspect his teeth, and even slowly wagged his tail. Sir Ralph took the dog's magnificent head in his hand and gave it a friendly shake; then he turned the brass plate on the collar to the light, and read the inscription: "Bruno. Constance Desbrook, The Hall, Desbrook, Devon."

"So you are a kind of watch-dog, are you?" he said. "Well, she might have a worse guardian.—By George! she has."

The late Sir John's valet appeared.

"Your room is ready, Sir Ralph," he said.

Sir Ralph went up the stairs two at a time, and Bruno followed him; but when they reached the corridor the great dog stopped and, looking wistfully after him, turned down to the room in which Constance was sitting.

Meanwhile, Lycett Crayson, after sending the valet to Sir Ralph, had gone back to the library. He stood

with his back to the fire for a few minutes, thinking deeply. He already disliked the new baronet? because he already feared him. Lycett felt in Sir Ralph's company as a very small cur would feel in the company of Bruno. Lycett had heard something of Sir Ralph's character; for vague and nebulous accounts of his wildness and recklessness had filtered down to Desbrook. It seemed to Lycett, as he tried to "reckon up" the new master of the Hall, that Sir Ralph was not the kind of man to display generosity to his cousin, even if she had been disposed to accept it. The man, if not actually a drunkard, evidently drank freely; was doubtless a "loose liver," and possessed of all the vices which had characterised the Desbrooks.

Lycett Crayson was glad that Sir Ralph had not turned out better.

A precious kind of guardian he would make! It might not be long before the proud Constance would be glad to seek succour in his, Lycett's, arms.

This was somewhat the tenor of that ingenious gentleman's reflections, and he was naturally absorbed in them; but presently he returned to his task of examining the papers which lay on the table. He took up a bundle of accounts; the tape was knotted, and he looked about for his knife. It was one of those very flat knives, growing flatter and thinner at the end of the handle—a lawyer's engrossing knife. He could not see it anywhere, but presently remembered that he had been sitting in the big, old chair beside the fire. He looked on the ground round about the chair; but it was not there, and, thinking it might have slipped between the back and the seat of the chair, he felt for it and found it.

And found something else.

A folded sheet of blue foolscap. He carried it to the light and opened it. It had been in its hiding-place so long that the folds were strongly defined. Still thinking of Sir Ralph and Constance, he ran his eye over the paper. It was written in Sir John's firm, masculine hand, and at the very first words Lycett Crayson's hands closed on the paper convulsively, and an exclamation escaped him. Instinctively he crushed the paper together and thrust it behind him, then he glided quickly to the door and locked it. But that would not do: someone might come at any moment. He unlocked the door noiselessly and, setting his foot against it, opened the paper again and read it through. By the time he had finished it, his face was crimson, his heart was throbbing as it had never throbbed before, his lips were quivering with suppressed excitement. He seemed to draw his breath with difficulty, and the eyes with which he stared at the paper looked through a mist.

It was the will for which he had been searching.

He stood, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the carpet. What should he do? Go straight to Sir Ralph, to Constance, and tell them of his discovery?

Of course, that was what he ought to do. He was a member of the honourable profession of the law, a man of some position in the county, an honest—yes, an honest man. Of course he must proclaim the finding of the will. But—but if he did so, away went every chance of obtaining possession of Constance. She would be an heiress, as far above his reach as ever. A sense of power thrilled through him. It rested with him whether she remained poor and disinherited, his inferior in wealth, or became the rich heiress of Sir John Desbrook.

The struggle went on for a minute or two; then, with a sigh—for no man crosses the line which divides honesty from villainy without a pang—he thrust the will into his pocket and, sinking into the chair in which he had discovered it, buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER III

SIR RALPH came down to dinner. He looked round the magnificent old room, at the well-appointed table, with its rare silver and old English cut glass and delicate napery, with a little gleam of satisfaction in his eyes ; and he was going to the chair which Hobson held in place for him, when he remembered Mr. Crayson.

"Isn't Mr.—what's his name?—Crayson coming to dinner? Go and ask him," he said to Hobson.

Hobson went, and came back quickly.

"Mr. Crayson begs you will excuse him, sir. He is very busy, and will take something in the library."

"Oh, all right!" said Sir Ralph ; and he proceeded with his dinner. It was a good one and well cooked ; Sir John had lured his *chef* from one of the best of the London clubs. The wine was as good as the food ; Chateau le Grange of a rare vintage, Burgundy like velvet, Pomeroy '93. As if he had never heard of such a thing as gout, Sir Ralph partook of all three, occasionally leaning back in his tall chair and holding his wine-glass to the light of the wax candles in the massive silver candelabra. He had the digestion of an ostrich, and his dinner put him into the best of possible humours.

A faint smile curved his rather stern lips. What a slice of luck it was ! He was stone-broke ; had fled to North America, not only to shoot wolves, but to avoid

his creditors ; for he was up to his neck in debt, gambling and other. And now, quite twenty years before he had expected it, he was the master of the great Desbrook estate, and—what was infinitely more valuable to a man in his position—owner of the whole of Sir John's vast fortune.

He thought of his cousin, and, thinking of her, made the very common mistake which all of us blunder into when we think of the age of other people. When he had last seen his cousin Cottie she had been quite a child ; and, though he must have known that, like other persons, she had grown, he still thought of her as quite a young girl.

Poor little kid ! Of course, he would do the handsome thing by her. He would send her to school—yes, she should go to a swell school, should have plenty of money, for dresses and for spending on chocolates and other things girls of her age would spend it on ; and when she grew up he'd get some woman in society to take charge of her and give her a run in the matrimonial race ; and when she had got her man he would settle a big sum on her. There would be plenty left for himself ; and besides, it would only be doing the fair thing ; for of course it was only by a fluke that she had been disinherited.

"Is that green Chartreuse?" he asked. "Isn't there any other? Then get some," he said to Hobson, as he took a cigarette from his gold case and, lighting it, thrust his hands in his pockets and turned his chair towards the fire.

"You needn't wait," he said. "Bring me a brandy and soda in half an hour."

Left alone, he stretched out his legs to the huge logs and yawned. He had been travelling for weeks ; the long railway journey, the excitement, made him feel

sleepy ; the head, which had a touch of the canine about it, though his hair was kept scrupulously short, dropped on his broad breast, and he dozed off. But he was sleeping, as Bruno slept, with one eye and two ears open, and a slight sound near the door brought his head up swiftly. Looking round, he saw the tall figure of a lady—a slight figure in deep mourning. She was standing just inside the room, regarding him with calm, grave eyes which shone like stars in the clear ivory of her face.

Sir Ralph stared at her for a moment or two as if he thought that he was still asleep and dreaming ; then he flung the cigarette which, though sleeping, he had continued to hold, into the fire and rose to his full height,

“ Good Heaven ! ” he muttered under his breath. “ It’s —yes, it’s Constance ! ”

He was so amazed by this revelation of his mistake, by her beauty, her grace, and the self-possession with which she stood, with her hands loosely clasped in front of her, that his usual *savoir faire* completely deserted him. He had expected to see a young girl, a school-girl of the ordinary type, all legs and wings, with a freckled face bleared and swollen with weeping ; and lo, this beautiful vision that struck him dumb !

He found his voice at last and, going slowly towards her, said, with the traces of surprise still in his voice :

“ Constance ! Is it really you ? I had expected—well, I had expected to see a young girl. Good Lord, how you’ve grown, how you’ve—you’ve altered ! If I’d met you anywhere but here I don’t believe I should have known you. Won’t you come and sit down ? ”

He had held out his hand and she had put hers in it,

and he made to draw her to a chair ; but she withdrew her hand and, passing him, took a seat at the corner of the table. He did not go back to his chair, but leant one huge shoulder against the mantel-shelf and looked down at her beneath his heavy brows, as if he were still struggling with his surprise, and scarcely knew, even yet, whether to address her as a child or as a woman. Constance looked straight at the fire. A woman sees more in a momentary glance than a man does in five minutes of close scrutiny. She had stood inside the door looking at him as he slept, and she had felt that he was as strangely changed as she was—so changed, indeed, that he effaced from her recollection the boy with whom she had once or twice played. There was silence for nearly a minute, then he said :

“ I am afraid you find the room full of tobacco smoke, I didn't know—I thought— Dash it all, I didn't think I was going to see a full-grown young lady ! I can't get over it even yet. Shall we go into the drawing-room—your own room ? ”

Constance shook her head.

“ It is of no consequence,” she said. “ I do not mind the smoke. Have you had a comfortable dinner ? I would have come down, but I did not want to eat anything. I hope you will forgive me.”

“ That's all right,” he said, the frown lifting from his face. “ They did me very well. I remember old Hobson : good fellow ; and my uncle always had a first-rate *chef*— Oh, I beg your pardon, Constance ! I didn't mean to speak of him so abruptly. You see, we hadn't met for years— But you know all about that. It wasn't all my fault— But, dash it all, don't let's talk about it ! I only want to say I'm deuced sorry for you ; that I wish he'd lived till he was ninety. I could have

managed to have jogged on somehow. But about this money—"

She did not shrink, but raised her eyes and met the steady regard of his calmly, gravely: "Yes?"

Sir Ralph kicked the logs, sending the sparks flying up the chimney. He found it difficult to express himself, to formulate any intentions, with those sad, beautiful eyes fixed on him.

"Look here," he said, "no man in his senses would believe that my uncle meant to leave the whole show to me. Of course he intended to chuck this will in the fire and make another, and a decent one, leaving his money to you. But good intentions pave the road to—a place unmentionable; and my uncle—like the rest of the family, by George!—never did to-day what he could do to-morrow. So there you are, you know! Now, of course, that is the only sensible way of looking at the business. And we'll just suppose that he did make a proper will. I've got the title and the estates; I don't suppose they're much encumbered, if at all. And you shall take the money. Eh, what do you say?"

His speech was rough, his manner abrupt, as the speech and manner of strong men are apt to become when they are doing a generous action. Little wonder that to Constance both speech and manner seemed well-nigh brutal.

"Do you mean that you are offering to me the fortune which my father left to you?" she asked, with the calmness which is so significant in a woman.

"Yes; that is what I mean," he said. "What is the matter with it?"

"Why should you make me such an offer?" she asked.

"Why?" he said, staring at her. "Because I'm not

in the habit of robbing women, because you are your father's daughter, because the money ought to be yours— What on earth does the reason matter?"

"I cannot accept your offer," she said.

"Why?" he demanded curtly.

"Because I am a woman, because I am my father's daughter, because I cannot accept the money he has given to another. What does the reason matter?"

He glowered at her in silence for a moment. "Look here," he said, "don't you be a fool."

She did not crimson under the curt retort.

"I should be worse than a fool if I accepted charity from you or any man," she said, quite calmly.

"Charity be—charity be hanged! It's only justice—bare justice. I tell you he meant to leave it to you."

"He did not do so."

"Very well, I mean to put that straight. Oh, of course you're proud; but for goodness' sake be sensible. What do you mean to do if you don't accept my offer?"

The question was put as roughly as it well could be; but Constance did not wince.

"I intend to earn my own living."

"Your own living be—hanged!"

She went on as if he had not interrupted her:

"I have been fairly well educated. I could go out as a governess."

"Teach snivelling children, shut up in a den called a school-room; work yourself to skin and bone," he interpellated gruffly.

"Or I could go as a companion to a lady," said Constance.

"To fetch and carry for some ill-tempered old

harridan; carry her muff, feed her beastly dog, read her asleep," he growled.

"Or I could act as a secretary."

"To some brute of a crank who'd work you to death, and never give you a 'Thank you.'"

"Beggars may not be choosers," said Constance.

"You are not a beggar," he said sternly.

"What better than a beggar should I be if I lived on charity? But do not let us argue."

"No, by George!" he said, with a short laugh. "I'm no good at that game. You'd beat me at it every time. You're clever, and I am only a blockhead. I don't want to argue, but, all the same, I think you're talking foolishness."

"No," she said, quietly; "I am talking sense. I have been thinking of my future ever since—ever since my father died and I learnt that I was left without any money. If I cannot do any of the things I have mentioned, there must be other ways of earning a living. I can learn typewriting; Mrs. Waring can live with me in lodgings."

"Who may Mrs. Waring be?" he asked, impatiently.

"She was my nurse. She would be my companion; she would live with me."

"In an attic in the slums, I suppose?" he said, sarcastically.

"I daresay it would be an attic," said Constance; "probably in the slums. At least, I should be independent—"

There came a knock at the door. Sir Ralph looked at Constance; she did not speak. With a sudden flush, he saw that she remembered that he was master there, and he called out fiercely:

"Come in!"

Hobson, with a glance of apology and deprecation at his late mistress, entered with a brandy and soda. Sir Ralph mixed himself a stiff glass, and took a long drink at it. When Hobson had gone again, Sir Ralph, leaning against the mantel-shelf, glowered down on Constance.

"Look here!" he said. "Give up this mad idea of yours. It's nonsense. You a Desbrook, talk of going out as a nursery-governess or a secretary! It's too absurd."

"It is no more absurd for me to earn my living than it is for any other able-bodied girl. What else can I do?"

"Do?" he retorted. "Accept my offer. Live ^{well} on here at the Hall. I shan't live here. Good Lord, the place would get on my nerves! I never stop anywhere for more than a month. I've got the Wandering Jew fever in my veins. You go on living here; fill the house with your friends; carry on just as you used to do. Don't consider me at all. Just go on as if that confounded will hadn't been made. I shall go abroad—I half promised to go back to North America. I'll come and look you up now and again, if you'll put me up for a night or two; but anyway, you stay on here as the mistress."

Constance shook her head.

"Do not think me insensible of your kindness; don't think me ungrateful; but I cannot do it. Why should I drive you from the home that belongs to you by every right; why should I embarrass you by my presence here? No; I have quite made up my mind: I shall leave the Hall at once—to-morrow. My father—my father left me a small income. If you will pay me this first year in advance it will be sufficient for

me, if I sell my jewellery, to start on my new life."

Sir Ralph threw up his head. Her allusion to her income reminded him of something. The red bar in his eyes glowed like fire, so that the whole eye appeared red.

"No, you won't!" he said. "By George, you reminded me of something I'd forgotten! This precious will makes me your guardian."

Constance's face flushed, and she raised her eyes and looked at him half fearfully. He was frowning, his eyes were glowing fiercely, his moustache seemed to bristle.

"Yes, I am your guardian. I suppose you'd forgotten that. By George, *I* had! But I am your guardian, and I say you shan't do this mad thing."

Constance rose, her hand pressed to her heaving bosom, her eyes challenging his.

"You—you would not dare—"

"Dare?" He laughed fiercely. "Wouldn't I? You don't know me. I'd dare anything to get my own way, to baulk any man—or woman—that ran athwart me. You want to play the martyr, to go out as a governess, secretary, companion—*you* a Desbrook! I say you shall not. You stand by this will—well, do so. But, by God, I'll stand by it too! I'm your guardian. I don't quite know what it means; but if it means anything, it means that I have the pull of you; that you've got to do what I want and what I wish. And I don't want you to lower and demean yourself by going out as a domestic drudge. No; and, by George, you shan't! I'm your guardian." He laughed fiercely, almost gloating over her, as she stood breathing painfully, her eyes fixed half fearfully, half indignantly upon him. "If I know anything about it, a ward has

to do what her guardian tells her. I tell you that I wish you—order you, if you like—to stay on here at the Hall!”

Constance’s laboured breath prevented her speaking for a moment or two; but at last she managed to get out:

“And if I refuse, what then?”

He leant towards her, his teeth showing in a masterful smile, his eyes glowing redly.

“But you won’t, you can’t! You accept this will, you profess to follow your father’s wishes. If you stand by it in one particular you must stand by it in all. He appointed me your guardian, and the law will uphold me. And, by George, I mean to use the power the law gives me! I say you shall stay on at the Hall; you shall look after it, you shall play mistress here.”

“And if I refuse?” said Constance, pantingly.

He seemed to fight with his passion for a moment—a moment in which his redly glowing eyes were fixed on hers almost savagely.

“Then, by Heaven, I’ll make you! I’ll save you from yourself. Don’t talk, don’t argue; I’ve made up my mind; and when I’ve made up my mind no man on earth can move it. You’ll stay here.”

Two red spots were burning on Constance’s cheeks; a faint, a very faint reflection of the red bar in his eyes showed in her grey ones. She drew herself upright, so upright that she was as straight as a dart.

“I am not bound to obey you,” she said.

“Aren’t you, by Jove!” he said, with a short laugh. “I fancy you are. I don’t know much about the law—excepting in the shape of writs—but if you have any doubt of it, I’ll ask that lawyer fellow, Crayson. I daresay he’s in the house still.”

The colour rose to Constance’s face.

"I will not dispute the law, or your power over me," she said. "There is no need to ask Mr. Crayson. You are my guardian, and I suppose I must obey you. Will you permit me to go to my room, Sir Ralph?"

He stared and frowned at her, his thick lips working.

"Look here," he said. "I'm a rough kind of a man, Constance— If I've said anything to offend you— But this mad idea of yours roused the devil in me."

"Have I your permission to retire, Sir Ralph?" she said, with a delicate irony which, when it is used by a woman to a man, either maddens or cowers him. It maddened Sir Ralph: he had mixed himself another ~~cord~~ and brandy.

"Yes," he said; "go to your room. But see here; understand that I am your guardian, your master, that I have made up my mind you shall remain at the Hall."

She went to the door, treading the thick Axminster carpet with a light, firm step. At the door she paused and swept him a curtsy—such a curtsy as had not been seen in the Hall since the stately dames of Carolian times had trod its floors.

Sir Ralph strode across the room, opened the door for her, and bowed in defiant mockery of her ceremony.

Then he strode back to the fire-place and rang the bell furiously.

"Bring me some more brandy," he said to Hobson. "And see here; if anyone in this house orders a carriage, come to me before you get one."

CHAPTER IV

CONSTANCE swept out of the room, across the hall and up the great staircase, still erect and with the mien of an outraged queen ; and when she reached her own room she paced up and down with her bosom heaving, her eyes flashing, her hands clenched at her sides.

Mrs. Waring, who had been awaiting with anxiety the result of the interview, found her there.

"Oh, what is the matter—what has happened?" she said.

Cottie caught her breath and drove back the proud tears.

"I have been talking with Sir Ralph," she said ; "that is all."

"But, oh, my dear, what has he said, what has he done to distress you so?"

"What has he said, what has he done?" echoed Constance, with a bitter laugh. "He has said that he is my guardian and master, that I am little better than his slave. He has forbidden me to leave the house, has as good as told me that I am his prisoner."

Notwithstanding her subordinate position, Mrs. Waring was a woman of some refinement and tact. She was wisely silent for a minute or two, then she said gently, soothingly :

"Do not make yourself ill about it, dear. Tell me

what Sir Ralph is like. I have not seen him since he was a boy."

"What is he like?" said Constance, impetuously. "He is a great big bully, smelling of drink and smoke; he has a vile temper, and— I hate him! And to think that he is master here—here at Desbrook—and my guardian; a man I hate and loathe, whose presence will be unendurable!"

"Oh, Miss Cottie!" remonstrated Mrs. Waring; for Constance, notwithstanding that she possessed a good deal of the Desbrook temper and was a high-spirited girl, was usually gentle and moderate.

—"It is the truth; why should I not say it? He had been drinking; he did not recognise me for a while; and he talked—he talked to me as if I were his servant and bound to do his will. I will leave the Hall to-morrow."

"Not to-morrow, dearest," pleaded Mrs. Waring. "Try and bear with him for a little while. You may have said something to rouse his temper. You know, dear, you can be very proud and cold and haughty when you like, and a Desbrook very soon gives way to passion. Oh, dear Miss Cottie, it is so important that you should do the right thing, that you should take no false step just now, at the outset of your life. Try and be patient with Sir Ralph for a little while, and see how things will work out. It is not as if you were alone at the Hall here: you have me with you. You could always come to me and let me comfort you. Come now, dear, and be calm; you will exhaust yourself with all this excitement. Come, and go to bed, dear."

Of course, Constance presently fell to crying in a proud, indignant way; and, tired as she was, she could not sleep. She knew that Mrs. Waring had given her

good advice, and though her proud spirit rebelled against the idea of remaining at the Hall, subject to Sir Ralph's authority, she resolved to take Mrs. Waring's advice and be patient, at any rate for a day or two; but if Sir Ralph's presence were intolerable to her, she would render hers little more pleasant to him. If she yielded obedience it should be under protest—a cold, implacable obedience which should irk him and deprive him of any gratification he might feel in conquering her.

She fell asleep at last, and awoke in the morning with that vague sense of oppression which we all feel when we open our eyes to a day of trouble. Since her father's death she had taken her meals in the small room which Sir John had used, because it faced south and was warm and comfortable; and she intended to breakfast there this morning; but when she entered it the table was not laid, and Mrs. Waring, entering the room, said:

"Are you ready, dear? Sir Ralph has just gone down."

"Do you mean that Sir Ralph expects me to breakfast with him?" asked Constance, with haughty surprise.

"I am sure he does," said Mrs. Waring. "He sent word to me early this morning to ask what time you usually had breakfast. And, dearest, I think it would be better for you to go down. After all, however much you may dislike him, you are the presiding lady here, and it is due to him—"

"Yes, I will render Sir Ralph his due," said Constance, proudly. And presently she went down.

Sir Ralph was standing with his back to the fire, whistling cheerfully—a low, musical whistle that

seemed to lighten and brighten the room. His eyes were clear, his head erect: he did not look a bit the worse for the drink he had taken last night, and there was not a trace, in his face and bearing, of the passion which he had displayed in his interview with Constance. He stopped his whistling and nodded pleasantly as Cottie entered the room.

"Good morning, Constance," he said, cheerfully, as if they had parted last night on the very best of terms. "Jolly morning, isn't it? Hope you're all right? I am as hungry as a hunter. You *are* all right, aren't you?" he added, scanning her pale face. "You don't ~~look~~ quite the thing; been shutting yourself up, I expect: look like a flower that has been kept in a conservatory with too little air. But I understand. But look here, you know: you musn't fret yourself into an illness."

"I am never ill," said Constance, coldly, as coldly as she knew how; and she knew how very well indeed.

He glanced at her questioningly, with a faint surprise. As a matter of fact, he had not a very clear recollection of what had passed last night; or, rather, though with an effort he could have recalled every word, it did not occur to him that either of them had said anything which could breed bad blood. Sir Ralph was one of those men who would knock a man down one minute and pick him up the next, bearing no ill-will and expecting none.

"Will you have tea or coffee?" said Constance, as coldly as before.

"Oh, coffee!" he said. He rose to get it from her, waving Hobson away, to whom he said: "Here, I don't think we want you at breakfast;" and as Hobson withdrew with an impassive countenance, Sir Ralph

said to Constance: "I hate servants hanging about me, except at dinner and when I am dressing. I have lived so much alone that they bore me. Besides, they listen to all you say. Not that I care very much about that"—with a short laugh—"for what does it matter what they hear? What will you have? Here are some kidneys and bacon, and eggs done up in some way or other, and there is ham and pressed beef on the sideboard."

"I have some toast, thank you," said Constance, in a tone that would have chilled a Polar bear. But it made no impression on Sir Ralph.

"Toast!" he said. "What's the use of toast? You want a decent breakfast: meat, eggs, and so on. You are not a puny invalid. You are a tall, well-built girl. You ride, don't you; and walk, I'll be bound?"

"I ride, yes," said Constance.

"Very well, then," he said, with cheerful brusqueness. "You want keeping up. All you women are too fond of running to tea and toast and rubbish of that sort. You want good, square meals and plenty of 'em. Here, take some of this toasted ham and an egg."

He filled a plate for her and planked it in front of her. Constance put it aside and went on buttering her toast. He looked at her curiously; then, with a shrug of his shoulders, went back to his place and fell to at his breakfast.

"What are you going to do this morning?" he asked presently, and quite cheerfully.

With her eyes on her plate, Constance replied:

"I am going to my room. I have some letters to write."

"What," he said, "write letters on a morning like this! Why, dash it all, it would be a sheer waste! You

had better write letters on a wet day, with nothing else to do. And writing letters is a silly thing to do at any time. Who wants to get any letters? I don't, by George! Mine are mostly bills. And as to answering them, the fellow who said that, if you left letters unanswered long enough they would answer themselves, was not far wrong. Don't you go and shut yourself up in your room answering letters. Come out with me. I want to ride round the estate, or as much of it as I can: I suppose it's too big to ride over in a morning. I daresay they can find me a nag. You've got your own, of course?"

"I have my own mare, yes," she said, stiffly. "Do you wish me to come with you?"

"Rather!" he said. "I hate my own company, especially when I can get pleasanter; yes, I should like you to come. To tell you the truth, I shouldn't be able to find my way; so you can show me."

Constance gulped down her indignation.

"Very well," she said. "I will obey your wishes, Sir Ralph."

He raised his heavy brows and looked at her curiously at the "Sir Ralph," and a smile twisted his lips as he said:

"All right! We'll start in an hour, eh? By the way, is this the only paper you get?" holding up the *Times*. "It's a day late; but you can't help that. I'll order some of the sporting papers. Is there a pack of hounds in the neighbourhood? There used to be, if I remember rightly."

"There is one. My—my father used to hunt it," said Constance.

"Of course! I remember. I'll take it over myself. Give me another cup of coffee, will you? I'm precious thirsty this morning: don't know why."

He strode round the table and stood by her side, looking down at her as she filled his cup—looking down at her from his great height with the good nature of a giant surveying something very weak and soft and gentle under his protection. Constance rose, and he went to the door to open it for her.

"In an hour, then, eh?" he said, with a cheerful nod.

Constance went to her room, every nerve in her body throbbing rebelliously. She had meant to crush him with her coldness and *hauteur*, to make him feel ashamed of himself; but the man was not a bit abashed; her coldness had bounced off him as bullets bounce from armour-plate. The blood mantled in her cheek and she shut her white, even teeth closely. But she told her maid to get out her habit; for she had resolved to endure and, what was more, obey Sir Ralph for awhile. While she was dressing she heard his voice in the stable courtyard. He was giving orders to the men in his rough, curt way, and whistling in between with the musical whistle which seemed to lighten the atmosphere. It was quite evident that he regarded her as a nonentity, that anything she could say or do could not pierce his thick hide. Her hatred of him grew more intense.

She kept him waiting a quarter of an hour, and came down the stairs slowly, with her eyes on a level and her lids drooping haughtily.

"Hallo!" he said. "Quarter of an hour behind time. George! what a time you women take to dress!"

Parsons, her groom, came to put her upon her mare, but Sir Ralph motioned him aside and, taking Constance's small foot in his big hand, tossed her lightly and deftly to her seat; then he arranged her habit as skilfully, and sprang on to the big Irish hunter

which he had selected for himself. Constance tried not to look at him, but of course she did ; and she yielded a grudging, reluctant appreciation of his well-knit frame in its perfectly fitting, well-worn riding-suit. He had a big black cigar between his lips, and he looked round with an air of satisfaction and well-being which irritated Constance.

He, on his part, scanned her with an openly approving glance.

"By George," he said, "women with a figure ought always to be on horseback !"

Constance flushed resentfully, but said nothing. As ~~they~~ rode along he hummed a snatch of song, the cigar still between his lips. Presently he said :

"Splendid air, this. Reminds me of Texas. Makes life worth living. Which way shall we go ?"

"Where you please," she replied. "Do you want to ride to one of the farms, or go round the estate ?"

"Anywhere you like," he said. "Let's go across this heath."

They put the horses to a canter which broke into a gallop. Sir Ralph looked at her critically.

"You can ride," he said, approvingly. "Do you hunt ?"

"No," said Constance, shortly.

"Ah, you should," he said, apparently unconscious of her curtness. "But that mare's too slight. I'll find something stiffer for you. This is a good hunting country. We'll overhaul the stables and get a decent lot in."

"I do not wish to hunt," said Constance.

"Oh, nonsense !" he responded. "A girl who rides as you do ought to hunt ; it's her duty. Besides, it

would soon bring the colour into your face—make a different girl of you.”

“Thanks, but I do not wish to be any different,” she said, coldly.

“But you don’t know what’s good for you,” he retorted. “Can that mare jump?”

“I’ve never tried her,” said Constance.

He looked the mare over quickly, and presently turned his horse towards a bank.

“Here, try this,” he said. “Press your foot in the stirrup, lean forward as she rises and backward as she goes down. I don’t think she’ll fall; but, if she does, get your foot free of the stirrup and slip off her. I’ll show you the way.”

He put the Irish hunter, who was as clever and cunning as a monkey, at the bank, topped it and alighted on the other side; and Constance followed his lead, and, obeying his instructions, landed all right.

“First-rate!” he said, with a nod. “You not hunt! Nonsense! It would be a waste of good material.”

The jump had brought the colour to Constance’s face; the blood was running freely in her young veins, her eyes were sparkling. For a second or two she forgot her dislike of the man who rode by her side. They found themselves in a ploughed field, and they trudged through this till they came to a gate which Sir Ralph opened for her. It is not easy to open a gate when you are mounted on a fiery and restless hunter; but he did it neatly, and forced the animal close to the gate so that he might latch it again. They rode along a lane, and presently they heard the bleating of sheep and the barking of a dog. Sir Ralph looked over the low hedge, and became interested in the efforts of a man to corner a flock of sheep.

"He has got a young dog," he said; "very little more than a puppy. Those sheep will give him some trouble. I know the game. I once had a sheep-run in New Zealand. Trying things, sheep. Always want to go the way you don't want 'em; and when you've got 'em in the right place, if one breaks out the rest will follow. There you are! See!"

The man had almost succeeded in getting the sheep into the corner of the field, when one of them broke loose from the others; the remainder of the flock followed it, and the whole of them scattered about the field. The man yelled at the dog, the dog got ~~confused~~, and the man, losing his temper, caught the dog and beat it unmercifully. Constance saw the blood rise to Sir Ralph's face. He drew back his horse so that it could get a take-off, then he cleared the gate, galloped across the field, caught the man by the shoulder, wrested the stick from him, and beat him as unmercifully as the man had beaten the dog.

"You d—d idiot! Don't you see that the dog is young, and is doing its best?" Constance heard him say. "Here, get out of the way! I'll show you the way to corner those sheep!"

He flung the man from him, called to the dog, and, with infinite patience, got the sheep into the angle of the hedges.

"There you are!" he said. "There's a lesson for you."

The man was furious. He stood rubbing his shoulders, on which Sir Ralph's whip had raised weals.

"D—n you!" he said. "Who are you?"

"I?" said Sir Ralph, with a grim smile. "I am Sir Ralph Desbrook. But don't you mind who I am. You look after your sheep, and don't you ill-treat a dog

too young to know his work, or, by George, I'll break every bone in your body!"

He put the horse at the gate again and alighted at Constance's side.

"A stupid chap that," he said, quite cheerfully.

Her face was pale, her breath came painfully.

"Have you—have you hurt him?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I daresay. Serve him right. I don't like to see a dog ill-used. Do you?"

"I don't like to see a man beaten," she replied, with cold anger.

"Oh, the man!" he said. "It will do him good. He'll remember it next time he goes to beat a young dog. There are some people who are all the better for a thrashing."

His fit of passion had passed, and he was humming again. But Constance drew her mare away as far as possible, and rode on with a cold, set face.

And this man, who thrashed a man on the least provocation and as lightly as if it were a matter of no moment, was her guardian and master! She could almost feel the lash of the whip on her own shoulders. Oh, how she hated him!

CHAPTER V

LYCETT remained in the library about an hour. He forced himself to go on with his task of examining the papers and accounts, but the will burnt like a live coal in his breast pocket, in which he had thrust it. He could see quite plainly how it had become concealed between the stuffing of the chair. Sir John, like all the Desbrooks, was a hard drinker; he had made the will in a fit of penitence, probably at night, after much whisky, and had fallen asleep. On waking he had missed the will and had thought that he had put it in the safe. The thought was quite enough for a careless man like Sir John. He had probably never gone over the papers in the safe, and had been convinced till the day of his death that the will was there right enough.

Lycett finished his work and left the Hall, his coat buttoned tightly over the will, his hands straying towards it now and again. He lived in a house on the outskirts of the village, a house which the Craysons had inhabited for generations. It was not very large, but one of those square, respectable houses to which solicitors are given. It was surrounded by a high stone wall, which was pierced in front by an old gateway of wrought-iron, and at the back, opening on to the garden, by a small doorway. So high was the wall that only the upper windows of the house could be seen. Lycett Crayson's establishment was a modest

one: an old superannuated clerk acted as butler and man-servant, and his wife did the cooking and the waiting. It was a model kind of establishment for a bachelor of such ultra-respectability as Mr. Lycett Crayson. There were no giddy house-maids or parlour-maids, no dallyings of grocers' or butchers' boys; the place was as silent as a tomb and almost as melancholy. Jekyll, the man-servant, admitted Lycett at the iron gate, and he went straight to his study, a gloomy little room looking out on the gloomy back garden.

"I shall not want any dinner to-night, Jekyll," he said; "I have dined at the Hall."

He locked the door of his study and, sitting down at the square table in the middle of the room, leant his head on his hands and gave himself up to thought.

He had got in his pocket Sir John Desbrook's will, the will which gave his vast fortune to his daughter Constance. It was a terrible thing to carry about with him; in fact, he could not dare to carry it about with him. He might be robbed; he might meet with an accident—might have a fainting-fit; all sorts of things might happen while the will was on his person. He must find some hiding-place for it. The importance of the thing weighed upon him like a nightmare. Here was Sir Ralph Desbrook figuring as the heir to all Sir John's wealth, while it really belonged to Constance.

He took the will from his pocket, took it gingerly, as if it were a live thing that might bite him, and read it over not once, but twenty times, and the sweat stood on his forehead as he read it. It was a terrible risk he was running. He was a respectable solicitor;

nearly all the county people were his clients ; he was regarded with respect, almost with awé, by the smaller tribe of farmers and tradespeople in Desbrook. If it were known that he was concealing a will, and a will of such importance, he would be ruined : worse than ruined ; for what is the penalty for concealing a will ?

Half mechanically he turned to a hand-book of criminal law, and read up the article dealing with the subject. It made the sweat grow thicker on his brow. He dared not run the risk of being found with the will in his possession ; he must hide it until he could produce it at the psychological moment. When that would be he could not foretell. He looked round the room in search of a hiding-place. He might place it in one of the books which lined the wall ; but Mrs. Jekyll had a tiresome habit of "tidying" the room ; in one of her periodical "cleans" she might rout out books and find it. He might lock it up ; but that the would not be safe. He might get typhoid, be delirious, and his keys might be used.

He went to the window. It was a French window, looking out on what ought to have been a lawn, but was simply a grass and weed-grown plat. In the centre of the plat was an old sun-dial. It was terribly out of repair, and the stones at its base were out of the level and moss-grown. This old dial seemed to fascinate Lycett, and presently he opened the window, and sauntering out with an idle air, he walked round the dial several times ; then he looked up at the windows of the house with a furtive glance. There was no light in any of them, excepting that of the kitchen, where Mr. and Mrs. Jekyll were eating the dinner which he had declined. He returned to the study, and after

placing the will in a thin, tin deed case, went out. He went up to the dial and kicked one of the stones at its base. It withstood his onslaught and, after a minute or two, he went to a tool-shed at the end of the garden and, getting a spade, used it as a lever, and forced up the stone he had kicked.

With another glance at the windows, he took the will in its case from his pocket, laid it under the stone, and putting the stone in its place, strolled back to the shed with the spade, and stood wiping his brows as if he had been engaged in some very hard work, eyeing the stone with a Gorgon stare. It was some minutes before he could tear himself away from the place ; for where the treasure is the heart is also. But at last he went back to the study, and sinking into a chair again, gave himself up to thought.

He held Constance Desbrook's future and fortune in the hollow of his hand. It rested with him whether she should remain penniless, a dependant on Sir Ralph, or become an heiress of vast wealth.

He was so exhausted by excitement and the varied emotions which his discovery had aroused that he fell asleep.

Presently, in his dreams, he thought he heard a tapping at the window. He jerked himself bolt upright and listened. It was not a dream ; he had not fancied it ; there was a tap at the window. He arose from the chair and stood listening, his colourless eyes bulging, his prettily-shaped lips working. The tapping continued, and he went to the window and opened it, and as he did so, he started back ; for a woman was standing there.

For a moment he stared at her in speechless amazement ; then he said huskily :

"Who are you?"

The woman pushed the window open, and brushing by him, entered the study, and stood looking at him with a smile of mockery on her face.

She was young, and, in a way, handsome, with almost black hair, and eyes that matched it. A rather common-looking girl, for all her good looks. She was fairly well-dressed, and she carried herself with a self-reliant, half-defiant air.

"What, don't you know me, Lycett?" she said.

"Becky!" gasped Lycett.

And as he spoke her name there came crowding upon him memories of Oxford, and especially memories of a certain little tobacconist's in the High, behind the counter of which Becky Thorpe had stood to serve out tobacco and cigars, and wile the fancies of the undergraduates.

She had so wiled Lycett Crayson's fancy that he had fallen in love with her, or thought that he had, which is the same thing to an undergraduate. There had been passages between them—who does not know the story of the Undergraduate and the Little Girl at the Tobacconist's? But instead of being content with flirting with Becky Thorpe, Lycett Crayson had gone further. He had been weak and foolish enough to persuade her to leave the odorous atmosphere of the cigar shop; had engaged rooms for her just outside the town—in fact, had made himself responsible for her future. Of course, he had soon tired of her, and having given her as large a sum of money as he could afford, had laid the flattering unction to his soul that he had got rid of her.

And here she was in his study, in his ultra-respectable house, at this time of the night!

Lycett was, not unreasonably, upset and annoyed.

"Becky!" he said, gravely and censoriously. "What brings you here—why have you come?"

She dropped into his own particular easy-chair, and, opening her light summer jacket as if she meant to stay, laughed up at him with the dark eyes which he had once thought—what a fool he must have been!—so enchanting.

"My own little feet," retorted Becky; "and they are small, aren't they? I only take threes, as you know. Why have I come? Because I wanted to see you. I'm in a bit of a hole, Lycett; and when you're in a hole you naturally think of your old friends. And you were an old friend, weren't you?" she demanded, with a roguish nod.

Lycett leant against the mantel-shelf and looked down at her. He had partially got over the surprise and shock of her visit: and he was asking himself how long she had been at the window, and whether she had seen him conceal the will.

"How long have you been here?" he asked. "Why didn't you come in at the front entrance?"

She laughed shortly.

"I have only just come. I didn't come to the front entrance because I didn't think you'd like me to. I made some inquiries in the town, and I found that you were still a bachelor, and a most respectable party at that. I thought it wouldn't look well if a young lady of my distinguished appearance came a-visiting you at this time of night. Oh, I know what's what! So I went round the back way; the little door happened to be open, and I stole in. I saw the light at the window there and, peeping in, got a sight of you. So there you are, you see."

Lycett drew a breath of relief. It was evident that she had only just come, that she had not seen him in the garden, or she would have presented herself to him there.

"I am very glad to see you, or any old friend, of course," he said; "but what do you want, Becky?"

"Well, I should like a glass of port, to begin with," she said, cheerfully. "I have had nothing since I got a bun at the junction; and you know what a railway station bun is! A glass of port and a biscuit will do me down to the ground."

Winching at her vulgarity—good Heaven! how could he ever have fancied himself in love with this vulgar creature?—Lycett went out of the room, and returned presently with a decanter of port, a glass, and some biscuits.

"There you are," he said. "And now tell me—"

Miss Becky Thorpe munched her biscuit and sipped her glass of wine deliberately, her dark eyes scanning Lycett Crayson's pale face critically.

"You're not looking so spry as you used to up at Oxford, Lycett," she said. "Settled down into the respectable, I suppose? They told me in the town that you were well-to-do, the leading lawyer here. Rather a change to the old days when you used to swagger about Oxford as merry as a cricket."

Lycett smiled sourly.

"Those days are gone, Becky," he said. "Yes I am a hard-working lawyer. I have succeeded to my father's business and have settled down." (Confound the girl! What did she mean by turning up at this moment? What did she want?) "Those days have gone—the past is past. I don't want

to seem inhospitable, my dear Becky, but may I ask—”

“Why I have turned up?” said Becky. “Well, it’s just this way. After you left me—and ’pon my word you didn’t come up to the scratch very generously. Fifty pounds isn’t a very large sum, you know. But I got on with it after a while—I managed to get an engagement at the Music Hall, and I did fairly well there. But I got crowded out—the profession’s so full, you know. Then I struggled on with what I’d saved; but I was on my beam-ends when my agent offered me a chance in Australia.”

Lycett nodded. Australia sounded very well in his ears.

“And you took it, of course,” he said.

“Of course,” she assented. “That is, I think of taking it; but I want some money to go on with.”

“Oh!” he said, drily.

“Yes,” she said, cheerfully. “I don’t want to be landed out there without a pound to my name. There’s dresses and shoes to be bought and, as I say, I want a little money in hand. So I thought of you, naturally. Nice port this, Lycett.”

She helped herself to another glass and stretched her feet to Lycett’s fire with an air of complacent well-being and assurance which got on Lycett’s nerves.

“You haven’t done much for me,” she said, with a charming air of candour. “Not so much as you ought to have done; for you’re well off, you see; a nice, snug practice. Oh, I’ve heard all about you in the town, as I say, and you ought to foot up handsomely.”

Lycett frowned.

“You have no claim upon me, Becky,” he said.

"Claim? No, I suppose not. But I could make it deuced awkward for you. I'm staying at the Red Lion. They seem to know you there. Oh, Mr. Lycett Crayson is no end of a swell in their opinion! Such a respectable gent! I could open their eyes if I told them just what you are. But I don't want to do that. I don't bear any malice. You come up to the scratch properly and, as far as I am concerned, you can retain your peach-like bloom of respectability. It's worth something to you, I should say."

Lycett Crayson stared at the fire with a heavy frown. Paying for past follies is always an unpleasant business. It seemed to him that he had already paid quite enough; but the girl sat there in his easy-chair, with her jacket unfastened, the wine-glass in her hand, the smile of conscious power in her dark eyes and on her rather thick lips; and he knew he should have to submit to the blackmailing.

"How much do you want, Becky?" he asked. "Look here, I may as well tell you that I'm not a rich man; and if I were, I could repudiate this claim of yours. You've no proof—"

She laughed as she emptied her glass and reached for the decanter.

"The kind of people you live amongst don't want much proof," she said. "A whisper is enough for them. I know the sort of people they are. Hint at a scandal, and the whole place is alive with it. Now, I don't want to make a scandal; I don't want to threaten you. I don't bear you any ill-will, Lycett. All I want is a hundred pounds."

"A hundred pounds is a great deal of money," said Lycett, who loved money, and parted with it reluctantly.

"I daresay," she said; "but it can't be much to you. You're well tiled in, I should say. Besides, it's the last you'll have to pay. I tell you I'm going to Australia. I don't suppose I shall ever come back. I should say, if you asked me, you're well rid of me for a hundred pounds; it's a cheap bargain."

"When do you sail?" asked Lycett.

"On the 27th—a week from now," replied Becky. "Hand me another biscuit."

Lycett grudgingly handed her the plate.

"How do I know you won't blackmail me again?" he said.

She laughed complacently.

"Oh, I shan't trouble you again! I daresay I shall stop in Australia. May get married there: who knows? Anyway, I don't want more than this hundred pounds; you might give me that for the sake of old times. Lord, what times they used to be!"

"Fifty," said Lycett; but so weakly that Becky laughed.

"Get out your cheque-book," she said; "or, better still, you'd better give it me in notes. You lawyers always have them by you. No, you're not looking well. Look as if you were worried. Take my advice and take things easily, Lycett, my boy."

The presence of this girl, whom he had at one time thought he had loved—fool that he was!—had become almost intolerable. He went to his safe, unlocked it and, taking out a cash-box, counted out ten notes for ten pounds, and handed them to her with so evident a reluctance that the girl laughed as she stowed them away in a cheap and gaudy purse.

"Thanks, very much," she said. "I thought you'd do the proper thing. After all, why shouldn't you do it?"

Think of the times we've had together, you and me, Lycett! And now I'll take myself off. *You won't see me again—for a devil of a time, at any rate. You'll be glad of that. My eye! Think of you, a respectable solicitor, living in the odour of sanctity! And me knowing what you used to be!"

"I don't want to hurry you, my dear Becky; but—"

She rose and fastened her jacket.

"All right; I'm going. Think of me out in Australia, and wish me luck. Aren't you going to give me one kiss before I go, in memory of old times?" She turned up her laughing face; but Lycett drew back—drew back so stiffly, with such an air of outraged respectability, that she laughed mockingly. "No? Perhaps you're right. Well, good-bye!"

He opened the window for her and let her out; then he sank back in his chair.

A hundred pounds. It was a large sum of money. But it was well that one could wipe out one's past with a hundred pounds. And he felt that he could rely upon her promise not to trouble him again. Becky, with all her faults, had always been a truthful young person. Besides, there was no help for it. As she had said, he could not afford a scandal that would not only ruin him in the eyes of the county, but destroy for ever any chance he might have of winning Constance.

Thinking of Constance, his thoughts, of course, returned to the will. Becky had said that she had only that moment arrived; but, after all, it would be only wise to take every precaution respecting his treasure; so he went out in about five minutes and, sauntering round with apparent aimlessness, lifted the stone, which, of course, came up with apparent ease

now. The tin case was still there. He opened it and saw the will snugly ensconced therein. With a sigh of relief, he replaced the stone and, after strolling up and down for a minute or two, was returning to the house, when he remembered the gate in the wall: it would be as well to lock that. He went up to the door to lock it, but found the key was absent. There was nothing extraordinary in the fact, for the entrance was used by the tradespeople, and the door was rarely locked; for there was nothing in the garden to steal. That is to say, there had been nothing; but there was something now—something of immense value.

“I’ll have that doorway walled up to-morrow,” he said to himself, “and some spikes put on the wall. There have been some suspicious characters about lately, and I’ll make that the excuse. The tradespeople can come in by the front entrance.”

With this resolution, he went back to the study, closed and fastened the shutters and, sinking into his chair, tried to work out some plan by which he could make his possession of the will a leverage for lifting him into the position of Miss Desbrook’s husband.

Now, when Becky had tripped off the threshold, with her light music-hall trip, and had got half-way down the garden, she paused and looked at the sun-dial. It was not at all extraordinary that it should have attracted her attention, for it really was an interesting bit of medieval times; but the look she gave it was something more than antiquarian interest, and her bright, black eyes went from the sun-dial to the French window. She only paused a moment, and then went on to the door,

As she reached it she threw the right side of her cape open and, her movement covered by it, deftly extracted the key from the lock ; then she went out, closed the door softly, and walked briskly down the narrow path at the back.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Constance and Sir Ralph got back to the Hall he leapt from his horse and went to help her to alight ; but Constance was too quick for him and, slipping from the mare before he could reach her, she went into the house with her figure haughtily erect and her face as cold as that of Diana. Sir Ralph shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly, but said nothing. She did not appear at lunch, and he ate the meal in solitude ; which he did not like.

In the afternoon he started out with a big, black cigar and walked round the stables and over a part of the estate, his quick eyes noting everything, and his equally quick mind mentally planning improvements. As a boy he had been fond of the place, as master he intended to live there. He would keep up the stables, take up the hounds, preserve the game—he could see that it had been much neglected—he would have some shooting parties, fill the old Hall with bright, cheerful people ; in short, he meant to enjoy himself, now that he was the owner of the Desbrook estate.

He returned just in time to dress for dinner. When he came down he noticed that the table was laid for one person only.

“Isn’t Miss Desbrook coming to dinner?” he asked Hobson.

A Girl of Spirit

"No, sir," replied Hobson, in a subdued voice, with his hands on the lid of the silver soup-tureen.

"Put that down," said Sir Ralph. "Keep the dinner back half an hour. Where is Miss Constance?"

"In her sitting-room, Sir Ralph."

Sir Ralph rose.

"Show me," he said, curtly.

Hobson led the way upstairs and knocked at the door of Constance's room.

"Come in," she said.

Hobson opened the door and Sir Ralph entered. Constance was seated at the table with a book, and at sight of Sir Ralph she rose with haughty displeasure in her face.

"I beg your pardon. Sorry to intrude," said Sir Ralph, standing with his hands thrust in his pockets. "I came up to know why you are not coming to dinner, Constance."

"I have ordered something to be sent up here," she said, coldly.

"Well, I didn't suppose you meant to starve yourself," he remarked. He looked round the room. "Comfortable little room enough. I remember it. But why on earth do you want to mope yourself up in it, while I'm moping myself to death in that big dining-room? By the way," he went on, without waiting for a reply, "this used to be my uncle's room. Has it been searched for the will?"

"Yes," said Constance, icily. "Every room has been thoroughly searched."

"Ah, well!" he said. "I've put the dinner back half an hour; that will give you time to dress, won't it?"

"I do not intend to come down to dinner," she said.

"Now, look here," he said, quite cheerfully, but with a tightening of the lips. "What's the good of your quarrelling with me? Do you mean to go on sulking for the rest of your life because I won't let you go out governessing? You don't know what's good for you. Anyway, I don't intend to quarrel with you, and I don't intend to let you mope yourself into an illness. Just you come down and eat your dinner with me, and behave like a Christian."

"You wish me to come down?" said Constance, her chin uplifted, her eyes surveying him under her proudly lowered lids. "You order me to do so?"

"Of course I wish it," he said, bluntly; "and, if you like to put it that way, yes, I do order you."

Constance's face flushed, and she bit her lip.

"Very well, I will obey your order. I will be down within the half-hour."

"That's right," he responded, with exasperating cheerfulness.

He went down to the dining-room and read the paper, to the accompaniment of a sherry and bitters; and before the expiration of the half-hour he heard the *frou-frou* of a dress, Hobson threw the door open, and Constance swept in.

She was in an evening frock: black net over a soft, black Indian silk, from which her white shoulders and arms gleamed like ivory. There was a diamond spray on her bosom, a diamond bracelet on the white arm, diamond rings on her fingers. Girl as she was, slim, and with an almost child-like grace, she looked regally lovely. Sir Ralph's red-brown eyes rested on her for a moment with a flash of approval and admiration.

"By George, you've been quick!" he said. "Look sharp, Hobson; I'm starving."

With deft celerity Hobson and his satellites served the dinner. Constance ate little, declining dish after dish; but Sir Ralph, enjoying his dinner, which one must admit he had earned, took no notice of her lack of appetite, and went on talking as if she had come down of her own free will.

"I've been over a bit of the place this afternoon," he said, "and I've made all sorts of plans for improvements. There a bit of planting to be done—I mean down at the end of the park by the lodge. We'll go down there to-morrow morning and talk it over."

Constance looked straight before her, about a foot and a half above his head: everybody knows how much a woman can imply by this elevated gaze.

"Is there any need for me to accompany you?" she asked, coldly. "I know nothing of such matters; my advice would be valueless."

"Not at all," he said, good-temperedly. "Two heads are always better than one, especially when one is rather a thick head: of course, I mean mine."

"Thank you," said Constance.

He laughed.

"Then there are the conservatories. They want rebuilding. That's in your line, anyway: every lady's fond of flowers. And I like 'em—I like to have 'em about the house and on the table—plenty of 'em. I don't know what sort of a gardener you've got here."

"He is a Scotchman," said Constance, with the air of a school-girl answering the questions of an examiner. "His name is MacAndrew; he is considered to be a capable man."

"Oh, I know those Scotchmen!" said Sir Ralph. "Most of 'em grow things for their own amusement and

for the local shows ; and you aren't allowed to pick a flower or a bunch of grapes, because his lordship wants 'em for his show-bench. If your Mr. MacAndrew is that kind of man we'll sack him. I like to take a knife and cut what I like— Don't you like that claret? I see you're not drinking any. Have some champagne?"

He signed to Hobson. But Constance declined with a gesture.

Sir Ralph said nothing; but when the famous Desbrook port had been brought in its wicker cradle and Hobson had left the room, Sir Ralph rose and filled her glass.

"I do not wish for any wine," said Constance, coldly.

"Probably not," he said quietly, but with a grim decision; "but it's good for you. You're looking pale; you've had a bad time; a glass of port is just the think a doctor would order you."

Constance flushed at the word "order." It was an unlucky one for him to use; but he did not notice it.

"I'll fill it up to the 'pretty' for you. You be a sensible girl and drink it."

Constance looked straight before her for a moment or two; then she raised the glass and drank some of the wine, set down the glass, and rose. Sir Ralph opened the door for her.

"I'll have one cigarette and come into the drawing-room," he said.

Constance was about to say that she was going to her room; but she set her lips tightly and swept with stately step across the hall to the drawing-room.

Sir Ralph smoked his cigarette and sipped his Chartreuse—Hobson had got the right colour during the day—in peace and contentment ; then he went into the drawing-room. Constance was sitting in a low chair with her hands in her lap. She had been waiting for his step—waiting with a feeling that was quite a novel one to her singularly proud and self-reliant nature ; for, with her dislike and almost hatred of the man was beginning to mingle a strange and subtle fear of him. He had only been in the house a few hours and on every point they had contested his will had vanquished hers. The very sound of his footsteps roused a feeling of revolt in her proud heart.

He came in, his hands thrust in his pockets, and stood for a moment looking round him.

"A fine room," he remarked, approvingly. "Don't suppose there's a better in the county. Wants some new furniture, though, doesn't it? We might have one of those London people down and give him a chance. That's a new piano, isn't it? Is it a good one? Who's the maker?" he asked, with interest. All the Desbrooks were fond of music ; with Sir Ralph it was a passion : his only harmless one.

Constance gave him the name of the maker.

"A good man," he said, with a nod. "Let's hear what it sounds like."

Constance sat still for a moment, then she rose with white face and trembling lips. She had not touched the piano since her father's death. Sir Ralph opened it for her and turned over the music.

"Ah, here's a Chopin," he said. "A fine chap, Chopin ! Let's have that."

He put it on the stand, still not noticing her white face ; then he went to a chair and threw himself into it

with an air of anticipatory enjoyment. And the anticipation was not disappointed. Constance was not only fond of music, but she had been well taught, and Chopin was her favourite composer. For a few bars her touch was uncertain and weak, for she was battling with her emotion ; but presently she forgot Sir Ralph's presence in the chaste joy of the music, and she played the finale of the nocturne with a technique and expression which simply delighted Sir Ralph.

"Bravo!" he said, at the end of it. "By George, you can play! Never heard that thing better done. I know many a professional that couldn't hold a candle to you. Play something else. Or do you sing? But of course you do. All the family have got voices." He strode to the music cabinet and took up a song at random. "Sing that for me, will you?" he said. "A great favourite of mine."

It was "I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby."

"It is a man's song," said Constance, putting forward the excuse in place of the one which she would have urged on anyone else: that she would probably break down with emotion.

"Well, and so it is," he admitted. "Here, I'll try it, if you like."

Constance started the accompaniment, and he began. She was startled, absolutely startled, by the quality and sweetness of his voice. She began to thrill—everyone knows the kind of thrill that a really grand voice produces in the listener—but in the middle of the second verse he stopped.

"Forget the words," he said; "never could remember them: pity to spoil a good song. You try one."

It was evident that the man, rough and callous as he

seemed, had no vanity, thought Constance, with reluctant approval.

He found a woman's song, and stuck it up on the piano for her.

"There you are; that's in your line. One of Pinsuti's sentimental ditties. Awfully good, though, all the same."

He went and leant against the carved mantel-shelf, and Constance began to sing. But she, too, broke down. Her voice, as sweet in its way as his, wavered and fell; her tears blinded her eyes so that she could not see the music; her hands shook on the keys.

Sir Ralph, who had been listening with delight, swayed himself upright, strode to the piano, and stood looking down at her with a curious expression on his face, as if he were halting between two courses of action. Then he said, suddenly:

"Don't give way. Fight it out, or you'll feel like that, every time you want to sing, for months to come. You should have finished that port, and you'd have been able to stick the thing out. No, no, don't get up; you fight the thing out. Try it again."

Constance gulped back her tears, shot a glance of indignation and resentment at him from her lovely eyes, then, spurred to desperation by her pride, went on with the song.

"That's right," he said, approvingly. "You've got a splendacious voice; but that's a matter of course."

Constance rose, white to the lips, her eyes flashing proud indignation, and swept to the door.

"Going?" he said, as he opened it for her. "Good-night."

Constance did not return the benediction; but, almost before the door had closed upon her, murmured:

"Brute!" and went up the stairs, half choking with emotion, in which indignation predominated.

Sir Ralph went to the piano and began to strum in the man's usual fashion.

"Don't know what's good for her," he muttered. "Thinks I'm a kind of devil. So I am, p'raps. But I'm not going to let her mope to death over the loss of a father who must have made her miserable."

Constance did not appear at breakfast the next morning, and he did not insist upon her presence. After breakfast he lit one of the big, black cigars and walked through the village to Mr. Lycett Crayson's.

Lycett was in his study, seated before a table strewn with deeds and papers; but he was still pondering over the case of the will; and he rose with an agitation he could scarcely conceal when Jekyll nervously announced Sir Ralph.

"Good morning, Mr. Crayson," said Sir Ralph, standing square and erect above the half-shrinking attorney. "Thought I'd walk over and see you."

"Take a seat, Sir Ralph, take a seat," said Lycett, in his soft voice, which he tried to make steady and cordial.

Sir Ralph seated himself in the clients' chair.

"Don't mind my smoking, do you?" he asked.

"Not at all, Sir Ralph, not at all," said Lycett. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"Well, you can give me some money," said Sir Ralph. "To tell you the truth, I've got precious little, and I'm up to my neck in debt. I warn you that I want a largish sum."

Lycett thought for a moment or two. It went against his grain to give Sir Ralph any money; for did it not belong to Constance—that is, to him, Lycett

Crayson, seeing that he meant to have her by hook or by crook? And yet he could scarcely refuse. Besides, it might be as well that Sir Ralph should embarrass himself and become a debtor to the estate.

"How much do you want, Sir Ralph?" he asked. "Of course, the estate is not settled, though the will has been proved; but I can advance you a moderate sum."

Sir Ralph considered for a moment.

"Well, I should say a couple of thousand would do me for the present," he said.

Lycett winced and shuffled some papers on his table; but at last he said, with a show of readiness:

"Certainly, Sir Ralph. I'll make the necessary arrangement, and let you have a cheque in a day or two."

"Thanks," said Sir Ralph, cheerfully. "Now, there's another thing. About Miss Desbrook, you know."

Lycett coloured resentfully at the "Miss Desbrook," instead of "Miss Constance." He felt that he was being treated as a servant: *he*, who held the will which gave Constance a fortune!

"I want to make it right for her," said Sir Ralph, emitting a volume of smoke that made Lycett cough. "I want you to draw up some kind of a deed—a deed of gift, don't you call it?—by which I can give her three parts of the private fortune my uncle left me. I'd give her the whole of it; but, as I say, I owe a lot of money, and I should like to pay it off."

Lycett stared at the table. What was he to do? If he refused, Sir Ralph would probably—in fact, certainly—go to another lawyer. And what grounds

had he for refusing? Lawyer-like, he tried postponement.

“That is a matter which requires some consideration, Sir Ralph,” he said, in his soft voice. “I will think it over—”

“It doesn’t want any thinking over, Mr. Crayson,” said Sir Ralph, curtly. “I’ve made up my mind, and I want to do this thing at once. Miss Desbrook is naturally cut up, and feels sore over this unsatisfactory state of things, and I want to set her mind at rest. Just you draw up a deed of gift, or whatever you call it.”

“Here and now?” faltered Lycett.

“Here and now,” echoed Sir Ralph, in that tone of his which implied a command and demanded obedience.

“We shall want witnesses,” said Lycett, desperately.

“Oh, that’s all right,” remarked Sir Ralph. “Get some of your people to sign it. I want the thing done—and at once.”

Feeling as if he were hypnotised by the other man’s strong will, Lycett drew a sheet of foolscap before him and made out a draft of a deed of gift.

“You will like to take this away and consider it, Sir Ralph?” he said.

“Not at all,” responded Sir Ralph, cheerfully. “Read it over, will you?”

Lycett read it reluctantly.

“That’s all right,” said Sir Ralph. “I’ll sign it. You get your witnesses.”

Still hypnotised, so to speak, Lycett rang the bell.

“Witness Sir Ralph’s signature with me, Jekyll, will you?” he said, when the old man appeared.

“Here, where do I sign?” asked Sir Ralph.

He scrawled his name, Lycett and the old man attached theirs as witnesses ; then Sir Ralph took up the deed, blotted it, and thrust it in his pocket.

"That's all right," he said. "I shall be glad of that money when you can manage it, Mr. Crayson. Good morning."

He lit another of his formidable cigars before he left the office, then strode home and marched up to Constance's room. She was writing a letter, and she looked up with a frown at his entrance.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said. "Letter-writing?"

"Yes," she said ; and she added, unwittingly, "I am writing to decline an invitation from the Marchmonts."

"The Marchmonts?" he said. "Of course, I remember them. The people at the Grange. What is it—a dinner?"

"Yes," she said. "Lady Marchmont has asked me—and you—to dine with them quietly. There is no party. There is her letter. I am refusing for myself ; you will no doubt refuse or accept, as you please."

"Oh, we'll both go," he said. "They're nice sort of people, and they know it will be good for you to go out a bit in a quiet way. You write and accept. I should like to see them again."

Constance bit her lip and tore up her half-written refusal.

"Look here," he said ; "here's something I've got Mr. Crayson to draw up. It's a kind of deed which gives you three parts of your father's private property."

He laid it on the table. Constance rose and looked down at it and then at him. Her face went white, her eyes shone almost as redly as his ; with an indignant gesture she took up the deed, glanced through it, then

tore it across and across and dropped the fragments on the table.

Sir Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"You won't take it? Well, no doubt you think you are acting like a heroine. By George, like a heroine in a beastly novel! *I* think you're acting like a fool!"

With a shrug of his broad shoulders and a scowl from under his dark brows, he turned on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER VII

ON the night Constance and Sir Ralph were to dine with the Marchmonts, she kept him waiting nearly a quarter of an hour ; and when she came down she bore herself like a proud slave forced against her inclination to obey her master's will.

Sir Ralph looked at his watch.

"I should say we shall be precious late," he said. "I don't know whether the Marchmonts mind having their dinner spoilt. I do, by George ! But you've got some excuse ; for you're looking tip-top, Constance."

She turned her face away in scorn of the compliment and, with Hobson, Mrs. Waring, and a couple of footmen hovering assiduously about her, made her way to the handsome but old-fashioned carriage. It was a roomy vehicle, but Sir Ralph sat opposite her, so that he should not crush the soft billows of her black lace dress. Having expressed his disapproval of her unpunctuality, he had fallen back into his usual condition of good-tempered satisfaction with himself and all things, which always unconsciously irritated Constance ; and he seemed inclined to talk.

"Let's see, I remember old Marchmont. Rather a chatty old bird, isn't he ? Goes in for farming and the model-landlord business. He used to give me a glass of port when I went there as a youngster. Not a bad sort. Lady Marchmont used to play the Lady Bountiful,

if I remember rightly. And there was a boy, wasn't there? Of course there was. I remember you and I played with him; rather a finicking kind of boy. Let's see, what was his name?"

"Clarence," replied Constance, concisely.

"Of course," assented Sir Ralph. "He used to be very particular about the servants calling him Lord Dollington. 'I am Viscount Dollington,' he used to say, with his nose in the air. Don't you remember we used to call him Lord Dolly?"

"I don't remember," said Constance: but she did.

"What's become of him?" asked Sir Ralph, with a chuckle.

"He has been abroad travelling," said Constance. "I have not seen him for years. I was in London when he was at home last."

"Ah, well," said Sir Ralph, comfortably, "I daresay he's been knocked out of his finicking ways. It's wonderful how we alter when we grow up. Now, you, for instance; look how you've altered. You used to be rather a tomboy of a girl. I remember daring you to climb the old oak on the lawn; but you did it. I can't fancy your climbing anything now. By George"—with a chuckle—"you're high and mighty enough without any climbing!"

Constance's cheeks flushed and her eyes flashed; but he did not see them in the gloom of the carriage.

"Yes, you've altered pretty considerably," he said; "but I don't know that I don't prefer the tomboy. But it's a way girls have; they put on more side than men: it's only natural, I suppose. But it's a pity. Road's rather rough. Wants some metal on it. I'll have it seen to at once, eh?"

A monologue is always difficult to maintain, and long

before they had reached the Grange, silence, like a night hawk, brooded between them.

Lord and Lady Marchmont met them in the hall, and the old lady, as she enfolded Constance in a motherly embrace, murmured apologies for the invitation.

"I am so glad to see you, my dear," she said. "I am afraid you thought it very strange and unusual my asking you to come to us, even for a quiet family dinner; but when I was over with you the other day you seemed so low and depressed that I thought I ought to make an effort to take you out of yourself. I really did. And it was so sweet of you to come. And this is Ralph! Dear me, how—how you've grown!"

"Yes, it's a habit I've got, Lady Marchmont," said Sir Ralph, in his brusque way. "You were quite right about Constance. She'd mope herself to death if you'd let her. How are you, Lord Marchmont? And how are the cows and pigs? Still going in for farming, I suppose? Rather think of taking it up myself. 'Old English gentleman' kind of thing, don't you know?"

"Yes, yes," said the earl, with a chuckle. "Settle down on the land: do your duty in that state to which Providence has called you: set an example to the tenants—eh, what?"

They went into the drawing-room and, though the dinner-hour was past, they seemed to be waiting. Presently Lady Marchmont said:

"I've such news for you, Constance, dear! Clarence came back last night! So altered, and so much improved! You will scarcely know him."

"Been on his travels," said Lord Marchmont. "Nothin' like travellin' for improvin' the mind. I remember when I did the grand tour"—he pronounced it "tower."

Before he could finish his sentence a footman opened the door and a young man entered. He was tall, but carried himself with the slightest suspicion of a stoop. He was fair, and he wore his hair rather long. This, combined with a rather feeble moustache and a somewhat receding chin, gave him a look of weakness and effeminacy. But Viscount Dollington laboured under the pleasing conviction that he was rather a strong man than otherwise—strong physically and mentally. There are “new” men as well as there are “new” women. And Clarence was one of the former. He had what is called advanced opinions; but they did not go very far, nothing in him went very far. He did all things by turn, and nothing very well or long. He wrote poems which he published at his own expense, and recited, to the infinite boredom of his friends; he spoke, with a kind of flaccid fluency, at the innumerable meetings which are got up, by cranks and faddists, in private drawing-rooms. He was always caught, like a weak and purposeless butterfly, by the glitter of the latest “ism,” started by some crank like himself, or some impostor and charlatan who traded on the weakness and fickleness of such persons as Clarence, Viscount Dollington. That he was conceited goes without saying; for he was always surrounded by a set of toadies who found it profitable to sing his praises in his ear and assure him that he was a great man.

Nothing but this conceit had saved him from the wiles of the host of marriageable women who had “gone for him” tooth and nail; but much to the relief of his mother, who was always haunted by the spectre of a daughter-in-law in short skirts and blue spectacles, Clarence, by some miracle, had hitherto

escaped the matrimonial peril; and the one object, the one almost despairing hope of Lady Marchmont's life, was that her dear boy might marry some, at any rate, presentable girl.

As he came into the room, dangling his *pince-nez* with one hand and stroking his feeble moustache with the other, his mother, beaming on him with a smile of maternal pride and fondness, said:

"Clarence, dear, how late you are! Here are Constance and Sir Ralph."

The young man came forward with a rather listless and lackadaisical air; but he was not quite a fool, and the sight of Constance, in all her grace and beauty, had a marked and instantaneous effect upon him. He dropped his *pince-nez* — because he could see much better without it — and, with much more animation than one might have expected, went to greet her.

"I really shouldn't have known you, Constance," he said. "May I call you Constance? It seems only the other day when we used to play together. Ah, those childhood days! How sweet they were! What would one give to perpetuate them! Their memories gladden our later, sadder days. And this is another playmate of mine — Ralph, the wild Ralph!"

Wild Ralph took the small and lady-like hand offered him and regarded the speaker with a grim smile.

"How do, Clarence?" he said. "Last time I saw you I fished you out of the Waldron. Do you remember? You fell in trying to get a bulrush."

Clarence coloured slightly.

"Really, my dear Ralph, I don't recall the incident. But no doubt you are right."

"Clarence was always so reckless," remarked Clarence's mother, with a fond and admiring smile. "I'm sure he was never out of my sight without my suffering agonies of apprehension on his account."

"Oh, he generally took care of himself," said Sir Ralph, encouragingly.

"And what have you been doing all these years, my dear Ralph?" asked Clarence, with a smile which he tried to make condescending, but which failed utterly under the steady regard of Sir Ralph's grim eyes.

Sir Ralph would have considerably astonished, at any rate, the feminine part of the company, if he had answered the question truthfully; but fortunately for their nerves, dinner was announced and they repaired to the dining-room.

"I've only the butler and one man waiting to-night," murmured Lady Marchmont, sympathetically. "I thought you would prefer it, under the circumstances; and you must not talk any more than you like; and we'll go into the drawing-room quite early."

"I don't in the least mind talking, dear Lady Marchmont," said Constance.

But there wasn't any necessity for her, or, indeed, anyone else but Clarence, to make an effort at conversation; for that gentleman monopolised it. He had just come back from the East, with which he had been so much impressed that he felt it incumbent upon him to recount his travels and experiences for the benefit of Sir Ralph, who knew every inch of the same ground, and a much larger region than Clarence had scampered over. But Sir Ralph listened, or seemed to do so, in profound silence, and Clarence's rather thin tenor trickled on in an ineffective monotone. But he was quite satisfied with himself and his performance; for

though he was talking to Sir Ralph, he was really talking at Constance, to whom his eyes were every now and then directed with a covert interest and admiration.

"So much might be done in the East," he said. "Of course, I don't mean in the missionary way." He smiled in a superior and tolerant fashion, as if Christianity were an exploded idea of which one really must not be too contemptuous. "I mean, of course, in a social way. Eastern peoples are really so benighted, so behind the times. You will agree with me, I am sure, my dear Ralph."

"Can't say I do," said Sir Ralph. It was the first time he had spoken for a great many minutes, and his deep voice, breaking in upon the thin one, roused Constance's attention; and, without turning her eyes, she listened. "If you are speaking of the Turks, I don't think they're very far behind the times. Whatever else they may be, they're the best fighting men I know; I was with them at Plevna."

"Really?" remarked Clarence, with a languid lifting of his eyebrows. "I didn't know. Oh, yes, they fight well enough; but I am sure you'll agree with me that the wave of our refined civilisation has not yet reached them. And it is to bring this wave—er—or, rather, I should say, to bring them within the reach of this wave, that I and a few other social evangelists, if I may so call ourselves, have started a Society for the Elevation of the East. We have already several names of persons of light and leading, who have promised to throw themselves heart and soul into the Cause."

He spoke as if nearly every other word ought to be written with a capital, and Constance's attention was again straying from the orator, and Ralph's great hand

was up at his mouth to hide a yawn, when Clarence said:

"We are trying to enlist the sympathies of Lady Castlebridge."

As he pronounced the name, with a little air of anticipatory triumph and a self-satisfied smile, Constance, who happened to be looking towards Sir Ralph, seated opposite her, saw him drop his hand from his moustache suddenly, give a grim twitch of the lips, and then stare frowningly at the glib Clarence, who, quite unconscious of the effect which the name had produced on Sir Ralph, meandered on.

"Dear Lady Castlebridge's patronage—assistance, perhaps, would be the better word, for we are all fellow-labourers—would be of immense value to us; for of course you know, my dear Ralph—or, perhaps, you do not know—Lady Castlebridge is a power in the world—our world."

"Oh, is she?" said Sir Ralph, with an air of indifference which, following on the obvious start which he had given at the mention of her name, seemed rather false to Constance. "I daresay."

He turned curtly, almost rudely, to Lord Marchmont, and asked him some question about the crops; and Clarence directed his attention openly to Constance, harping still on his new fad, and asking her to join the band of cranks.

Constance smiled in a non-committal way.

"Thanks, very much," she said; "but I shouldn't be of the slightest use."

"Ah, my dear Constance," he murmured, "we cannot lay the flattering unction to our souls that we are, any of us, however small our capacities, of no use in this world. The tiny rain-drop that runs down the

window-pane goes to swell the mighty volume of the ocean."

"I'm the kind of rain-drop that wouldn't count," said Constance.

"Ah, do not say it!" he exclaimed, fervently, with his rather prominent eyes fixed on hers admiringly. "If I am any judge of character—and my friends think, rightly or wrongly, that I am—I should unhesitatingly credit you with an immense power of influencing your fellow-creatures. You must let me send you a little pamphlet of mine, quite a small thing of a few pages, but which I will venture, without immodesty, to say covers the whole ground of our noble mission. Will you read it?"

"Why, yes, of course I will," said Constance. "Thank you very much."

Lady Marchmont rose, and the two ladies went into the drawing-room, her ladyship putting her arm round Constance's waist.

CHAPTER VIII

"AND now tell me, dear Constance," she said, seating herself beside her and holding and patting her hand affectionately, "tell me what you think of Sir Ralph. Of course, I'm not going to speak about the will, though you know what I feel; but it's of no use crying over spilt milk, is it, dear? Sir Ralph has got the money and is your guardian. Tell me what you think of him."

Lady Marchmont was one of those good ladies who seldom wait or require an answer to their questions; and she went on without waiting for a reply to this somewhat embarrassing query.

"It must seem so strange to you, my dear—I mean his being so young. Why, he can't be many years older than you—five or six at the most! And really, when one comes to think of it, he *is* absurdly young to be the guardian of a grown-up girl like you. I suppose it is all right—I mean that the *convenances* will not be shocked by your living there together—"

Constance looked at her with a curious coldness.

"It does not matter whether persons are shocked or not," she said. "Sir Ralph is my guardian, and it is his wish that I should remain at the Hall."

"Of course, of course, dear," said Lady Marchmont, hastily. "Of course it is all right. And there is Mrs. Waring. She is the widow of a professional man,

and quite an efficient chaperon. And he is kind to you—you think you will be able to get on with him?"

Constance's lip curled with a smile which had a touch of bitterness in it.

"He has not beaten me—as yet," she said.

Lady Marchmont threw back her head with a little exclamation of horror.

"My dear Constance!" she exclaimed, staring at the beautiful, proud face.

Constance laughed.

"Oh, yes, Sir Ralph means to be kind. I have no doubt we shall get on together as well as may be expected."

"My dear girl, you have removed a weight from my mind. He looked so stern and grim, and is so—so rough and brusque, that I was afraid he might jar on you, that you wouldn't be happy with him. Dear, I am so much relieved!—And don't you think dear Clarence is greatly improved? He has travelled and seen so much, and his mind is so active: but no doubt you noticed that?"

"Yes," assented Constance; "he appears to have a very active mind."

The fond mother sang her son's praises for some minutes, and Constance listened, making the proper responses at the appropriate moments; but though she played her part in the conversation, her mind was straying and, strangely enough, to Sir Ralph.

Why had he started and frowned when Clarence had spoken of Lady Castlebridge?

She was annoyed with herself for thinking of the matter, for having noticed Sir Ralph's look of surprise. It was nothing to her. His past, his

present, and his future, excepting so far as she, as his ward, was concerned with his future, were no concern of hers.

The gentlemen, coming in from the dining-room, found Lady Marchmont still prattling of her son's manifold virtues and talents, and Constance listening with a vacant look in her eyes.

Clarence went up to her at once.

"Are you interested in photographs?" he asked, with the smile a man puts on when he is going to amuse a rather intelligent child. "I have an album of photographs which I took on my travels, and I should like to show them to you."

Constance suffered herself to be led to a distant part of the drawing-room, where a bulky album reposed on a table specially set apart for it; and Clarence forthwith proceeded to exhibit and explain some exceedingly bad photographs. They were very cruel specimens of the amateur photographer's cruel art, and Constance made several mistakes in expressing approval of studies of cows which were meant to be ruins of an ancient temple, and of ancient temples which were meant to be cows or other beasts of the field. It was necessary that Clarence should be seated very close to her, and he piped his little explanations and lectures in tones that were sentimental and were sometimes even tender. The proximity of the beautiful young girl stirred his sluggish pulse and set his small heart beating in quite a novel fashion; and he was perfectly happy and self-satisfied.

The earl had betaken himself to his own particular arm-chair and was sleeping the sleep of the just, so that Sir Ralph and Lady Marchmont were left to amuse themselves. She spoke of his advent at the Hall,

expressed a hope that he would make it his principal place of residence and would "settle down"; then, of course, she got on to the one paramount subject with her.

"Dear Clarence!" she murmured, looking over towards him fondly. "He is always so good! And don't you think he is really quite clever? I'm sure I don't know where he gets it from; the Dollingtons have always been rather stupid people."

Sir Ralph, who was bored to death, suppressed a yawn and remarked that you never could account for these freaks in families.

"How happy he looks!" said the countess, not a whit offended. "It is so nice to see him so interested. And it is quite evident that he *is* interested in dear Constance; now, don't you think so, Sir Ralph? Pray look at them, sitting there together just like boy and girl."

Sir Ralph looked at them, but said nothing, and Lady Marchmont went on:

"Of course, we are very anxious about dear Clarence's future. I may say that he has never given us a half-hour's anxiety since he was born—"

"Perhaps he's saving it up for you all in a lump," muttered Ralph.

"What did you say, dear Ralph? He has always been so good and so tractable; and now our sole anxiety is that he should make a suitable marriage. Of course, we have had our anxious moments on that subject. Marriage is such an important thing for everybody; but it is *most* important for dear Clarence. You see that, of course? He is our only son—child—and everything will go to him. I really think I should die happy if I could see him married to some nice girl

in his own station ; some girl I could welcome as a daughter-in-law— Just look at those two ! How absorbed in each other they are ! ”

Ralph glanced across the room again and nodded ; though it seemed to him that Constance was looking more than slightly bored.

“ What a handsome couple they look ! Really, the idea occurs to me—now, doesn’t it occur to you, dear Ralph ?—that Clarence might do worse than marry dear Constance ? ”

“ A precious sight worse ! ” said Ralph, grimly.

The old lady beamed over her idea as a hen might be supposed to beam over a particularly fine egg she had laid.

“ Really, it is a good idea. Constance has always been to me like a daughter. And a Desbrook, you know, is the equal of anyone.”

“ You make me proud, my lady,” said Ralph, with a twist of his stern lips.

The Dollingtons only went back as far as the seventeenth century, while the Desbrooks were lords of the soil in the fourteenth.

“ And she is such a sweet girl,” continued the countess, warming up to her idea. “ I am sure she would make an admirable wife—just the girl to fill my place. Of course, it’s awkward about the money—oh, I’m sure I beg your pardon, my dear Ralph ! I was forgetting—but the money in this case does not matter, does it ? Dear Clarence will have enough. Oh, yes ; the money does not matter— Now he is going to show her his collection of weapons. We must not disturb them— Will you think over the matter, my dear Ralph ? Of course, it rests with you. You are her guardian, and I am sure you must be anxious to see her settled ; and

she would be so nicely settled if she married dear Clarence, would she not?"

"She would, indeed," assented Sir Ralph, with intense gravity.

He stood it for a few minutes longer, then he lugged out his watch and said, bluntly :

"Time we all went to bye-bye. I will go and find Constance."

He found her in the hall, where Clarence was exhibiting some of the trophies which he had bought at the bazaars in Constantinople, in pleasing ignorance of the fact that they had been manufactured in Birmingham. He was trying to wield a double-handed sword, and it looked to Ralph as if he were in danger of beheading himself; in fact, in sheer pity, Ralph took the weapon from him, mechanically swung it round his head, and then stuck it back in its place.

"Come on, Constance," he said; "time we went."

"Oh, really not yet!" piped Clarence. "Constance and I are enjoying ourselves so much; and there are ever so many other things I want to show her."

But Constance edged away with a guilty feeling of relief.

"You must show them to me another time," she said.

"May I?" he said. "When shall I see you again? May I come over to-morrow? And, oh, Constance, would you not like to come for a drive on my coach? It has just been sent down You and Ralph." He included Ralph with a gracious smile. "I am sure you would like the ride; and I have a very good team."

"I should like it very much," said Constance. "We can talk about it to-morrow, if you are coming over," she added graciously—graciously, because Sir Ralph was standing by with the cynical smile which she hated.

Clarence clung to her to the last moment, holding her hand for an unnecessary time through the carriage window; and when he got back to the drawing-room he pulled himself upright, and, caressing his moustache, remarked:

"How very much improved Constance is—don't you think so, mother?"

And for answer the fond mother linked her arm in his, and looking up at his face with its self-satisfied smile, murmured:

"Dear Clarence!"

For some time on the journey home Ralph and Constance were silent. He was thinking of Lady Marchmont's idea. After all, wasn't it rather a good one? Clarence was a fool; but sometimes fools make excellent husbands. He would be the Earl of Marchmont, with plenty of money to settle on his wife and keep up the large estate. Constance might do worse. She might marry—well, for instance, she might marry a ruff of a man like himself. Girls were such fools, and ran such risks in gratifying their fancies. Yes, it wasn't such a bad idea; and perhaps it was his duty as her guardian to encourage it. So he broke the long silence by saying in a casual, too casual, way:

"Nice fellow, Clarence."

"Do you think so?" said Constance, from the corner in which she was nestling.

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I don't know that I have thought about him," she replied, indifferently.

"He'll be the earl some day," said Ralph, "and there's no end of money. He's what you'd call a deuced good match."

"I beg your pardon," said Constance, icily. "I should not call him anything of the kind."

"No? All the same, he would be. Most girls would jump at the chance of being Countess of Marchmont."

"Would they?" said Constance, with indifference still more profound.

Sir Ralph stretched out his long legs impatiently. There was no doing anything with her. They reached home and, as he lit a candle for her, he said:

"I am going up to London to-morrow. Anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, thanks," she replied, coldly. "What train do you go by?"

"The morning train," he said.

"Very good. Good-night."

"Good-night," he responded. "Hold on! Wait a minute."

She paused, with her hand on the carved balustrade of the stairs, and waited, her face turned from him.

"Look here," he said. "That idio—Clarence said something about driving you in his four-in-hand. Don't you go until I come back."

"Why not?" she asked, her lids lowered, her chin uplifted.

"Because I don't want you to," he replied, curtly. "I don't think it's safe. I don't think Master Clarence could drive a four-in-hand."

"He must have driven it before," she said.

"I daresay; but he isn't going to drive it with you on board."

"Do you forbid me to go?" she asked, coldly.

He set his mouth squarely and frowned up at her.

"That's it," he said, curtly. "I forbid you."

Early as it was, she was down at breakfast the next morning; but Sir Ralph did not appear to be grateful for her little attention.

"Why on earth did you want to get up?" he asked.

"I always got up to see to my father's breakfast when he was going by the early train," she said.

"Then don't trouble to get up for me again," he growled. "If Hobson can't see to my breakfast we'd better get somebody who can."

He drove himself to the station in a dog-cart with a particularly wicked horse to which he had taken a fancy, and arrived in town in due course. He went to his club first, and was congratulated by the men there on his recent accession to the baronetcy and Sir John's fortune, had a generally good time, stood unlimited champagne, and acquitted himself in an appropriate manner; then, with his cheque-book in his pocket, he went round to some of his tradespeople — Lycett Crayson had supplied him with the money he had asked for. The tradespeople received him with open arms and smiled on him with respectful affection. They seemed surprised, indeed almost hurt, that Sir Ralph Desbrook should want to pay his account, and they were eager in their protestations of devotion to his service. He went back to his club in the best of humours and dined with three or four of his set, who

wanted him to join a bridge party in the card-room ; but he broke away from them with some difficulty and, calling a hansom, told the man to drive to Carlton House Terrace.

He stopped at one of the largest houses in the Terrace — Lord Castlebridge's — and, inquiring for Lady Castlebridge, was informed by the footman that her ladyship was at home.

Sir Ralph went into the great drawing-room, great, not only by reason of its size and the splendour of its appointments, but because it had been and was still the rendezvous of some of the greatest men of past and present times. For the Castlebridges had been for centuries a tremendous power in the land. One of them had been prime minister, and all of them, by virtue of their high rank and uncountable wealth, had been leaders in the political and social world of England. Sir Ralph had not asked for Lord Castlebridge, the present representative of the mighty family, because his lordship was a paralytic and confined to his room, where even there he was still a power ; for he was lord of more than half a county, and thousands of meaner mortals hung upon the nod or the shake of the frail head.

Sir Ralph leant against the carved mantel-piece, slowly stroking his moustache and looking down at his irreproachable boots ; and presently the doors were thrown open and an extraordinary beautiful woman entered. She was divinely tall, but not divinely fair in the literal sense of the word, for she was a brunette of the most pronounced type. Her hair, soft as silk, was black, her eyes also were dark, and her complexion was that which has been likened to old ivory. She was as graceful as a girl, though she had passed

the girlish age ; but with her grace was combined a bearing which can only be described by the word imperial.

The doors closed behind her, and she swept forward with a touch of colour in her ivory face, a light of welcome in her dark eyes. It may safely be said that no one of her friends had ever seen her cross a room with such girlish haste and impulse as she crossed it now, that no one of her friends had ever heard her usually cold and even voice ever melt as it melted now as she said :

“Ralph! At last!”

She extended her exquisitely moulded arms and laid them on his shoulder, and he bent his head and kissed her on the lips which bore themselves so proudly in public, but which were now curved with a womanly tenderness.

“When did you come?” she asked.

“To-day,” he said.

“Tell me all about it,” she said, not imperiously, as was her wont, but with a soft pleading, the eager, pleading voice of the woman who loves.

He leant against the mantel-shelf, his big hands folded behind him, and looked down at her as she sank into the chair quite close to him.

Between this woman and him there was a strong tie. He had loved her when she was the unmarried daughter of a penniless Scotch peer. He had been as penniless as she, with no prospects, for his uncle might have married again and begotten an heir to the Desbrook property ; and there had been no hope for them. Her father, with the canniness of his race, had exploited his beautiful daughter to the best of his power, and had married her to the rich and powerful Earl of

Castlebridge, and Sir Ralph had been compelled to stand by and witness the marriage. Lady Castlebridge had been a good wife; no breath of scandal had clouded the dazzling mirror of her life; she had nursed the paralytic nobleman, had furthered his interests, had lived up to the station to which her marriage had raised her. But, though she had done her duty to the last letter of the alphabet, she had never been able to wrest her heart from its first resting-place: she still loved the man who had won her first love.

"Tell me all about it," she said again, her eyes devouring his face, her hands clasping each other.

Sir Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"What is there to tell?" he said. "I have come into the place. And the money, by a kind of fluke."

"I am glad," she said, "very, very glad, Ralph! It will lift you out of all your difficulties. You will be able to pay your debts; you will be—I was going to say 'happy.' But you can't be that, I know, Ralph—that is, if I am to judge you by myself. It was good of you to come up so soon. I was going on to the State Ball; but I will not go now. Come up to my room."

He followed her up to her *boudoir*. With girlish grace, with an utter absence of the "imperial" manner for which she was famous, she wheeled a chair to the fire, held out a box of cigarettes, and even lit a taper for him. Then she drew up a low chair quite close to him and, clasping her knees with her white arms, looked up into his stern face.

"And you have been down there, of course?" she said. "What is it like? But I can imagine it. A



dreary country place, with dreary country people. You won't be able to live there very much. No matter; you can afford a house in town now. We shall see each other very often—every day. Oh, Ralph, I am so glad! But—but”—her voice broke—“if it had only come earlier, five years earlier, what—what a difference it would have made to us! Oh, think of it, Ralph!”

He nodded.

“I know,” he said; “but that is the worst of it: it didn't. That's always the way: everything comes too late. How is he?” He meant her husband, the great Earl of Castlebridge.

She leant back and her brows drew together.

“He is just the same. The doctors say he may go on in the same way for years—for any time.” She sighed heavily. “But do not let us think of—of what might have been, of what might be. That way madness lies. Tell me, Ralph: what is this about the girl, your uncle's daughter, your cousin? They were talking about it at the Crownfields' last night. She is your ward—you are her guardian, are you not?”

Sir Ralph nodded again..

“Poor Ralph!” she murmured, sympathetically. “A raw, uncouth country girl, I suppose? What a nuisance! Never mind!”

The vision of Constance, in all her girlish loveliness and grace, rose before Ralph's eyes, and he fidgeted in his chair.

“I am afraid she will be a trouble to you,” she said. “But never mind; she will marry—is she old enough, by the way? But don't let us talk of her, or of anything disagreeable. You are here—here with me. Oh, how long it seems, Ralph, since we sat together! How long

it seems— But patience, patience, Ralph, it must end some day. I shall be free—free to—' It is the one thought that upholds me, that keeps me going. My wasted life— But I will not think of it. I will look forward. But for that I think I should go mad!" She leant towards him and laid her quivering hand, shimmering with diamonds, upon his knee. "It is only the one hope that supports me, that makes this present life bearable."

She paused a moment. Ralph laid his hand upon hers and pressed it soothingly. She threw back her head and drew a long sigh.

"Sometimes—you'll laugh at me, Ralph—but sometimes I am haunted by the dread that there is a Fate against it—the Fate that separated us, that tore me from you, and made me—what I am. Sometimes I am possessed with a horrible fear that Fate has another disappointment for me, that, even if I should be free, you—I—that something will come between us!"

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You shouldn't give way to fancies, Agnes," he said.

"I know, I know," she responded. "But how can I help it? You know what my life is. Waiting, waiting, waiting! And having to keep the mask on all the time. Little wonder that the horror seizes me that I may wait in vain. Ralph, I don't want you to make any protestations. I think, I know, that I am sure of your heart. But—but if anything, anyone, should come between us, I—"

She rose from her chair and stood before him, imperial, Cassandra-like in her beauty.

"If it should, be it what it may, I feel that I am capable of anything, anything! Let the obstacle be

THE HOLD-UP

hip. White saddle-mark on the near side. No mistake in that, I reckon. All right, Mr Boden. You wait a bit."

Boden found Chris waiting for him. Chris had been looking for men for the Lying Cross without result. They rode homeward, and not till later did Chris unbosom himself.

"All the men who amount to a hill o' beans have signed up with one outfit or another," he said. "Of course, I could have got some loose fish, but I wouldn't have 'em. I'd be just as like as not to get a hand-picked bunch of these very Nighthawks themselves. I'm afraid we are up against it, dad."

"It looks like it, son. You and I and Look Chang'll have to hold the fort till luck changes. It's a cinch I'm not goin' to hire just any old cowpoke from the bar-rooms of Drybone. Damn it all," he burst forth. "I've lived here most of a lifetime and I never saw a place change like this has. I wish you'd ride up into the hills above Red Gulch in the mornin', son, and take a look-see there. Look to the fencin' of the alfalfa field as you go."

"I'll leave just as soon as I can tack a shoe on my horse."

"Take my horse," said his father, rising. "It's a long trip and it'll keep you overnight. Watch for loco-weed, too, Chris. I thought I saw a bunch of it in the horse pasture. Good night, son."

Chris left at daylight, heading for the hills that blocked off the dark north-eastern skyline, and during that day, while he was engaged on his lawful occasions, other men were differently engaged.

Jeff Tyler working at his leisure in the big barn behind the Blue Front laboured like a Titan—or a Titian. He was no artist and the labour involved in turning into a

pintado horse one that had been solid bay was not light. He could not use oil paint, for oil would run. He could not apply the paint too early; some one might see it and ruin all. Too, the horse might roll while wet and ruin it. It must be fresh, but not too fresh.

Added to that was the fact that the horse himself resented it. Twice Jeff had narrow escapes from the flying heels. The last time he rose cursing.

"That's all the thanks I git," he said grimly. "I've made you better-lookin' than you ever was before. Fer a li'l bit I'd pull the fiddle-head offen you and forget to fit a new one."

He did not dare move till dusk; too many people might see his completed handiwork. He knew the buckboard would not pass down Firewater Cañon till nearly eight o'clock. He had made that trip often with old Ellis, the stage-driver, and he knew his habits. Ellis would stop for dinner and a change of teams at Fusil Ford and would get supper and feed his stock at Wolf's Head Pass, ten miles from Drybone.

He would leave Wolf's Head about seven o'clock; eight would find him well down the cañon. There were many places in that cañon where a hold-up could be pulled off, but Boulder Point was the best place. That point, a craggy, rocky mass of boulders thrust from out the cañon walls as a man's thumb sticks from his hand, and the trail made a U-turn around the nose. No better place could be found.

When dusk was falling, when he knew that all Drybone was either eating at home or drinking in public, Tyler led the rejuvenated horse by back alleys to the western edge of the town. A line of twenty-year-old cottonwoods provided a windbreak that would give cover.

Carefully keeping under shelter of the trees he passed around the western edge of the houses and at the edge of the long level swung into saddle. His heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. It was the first time he had taken a lone hand in any affair of the Nighthawks. Always before this Biggs had been with him to direct. He took consolation in the fact that Biggs was on the buckboard.

"That wouldn't help a hell of a lot, though, if I'm caught," he reflected. He knew that Biggs would be the first to double-cross him. The thought of the twenty-five thousand dollars in gold on the stage stiffened his spine, too. It was more money than he had ever seen at any one time.

He worked north, along the windbreak, swung eastward through the low brush along the edge of the foothills and drew up his sweating horse in the shadows of the rock on Boulder Point to listen. There was no sound but the rushing of the wind in the tree-tops above him and the cluck and gurgle of the water in the little tortuous creek. His heart beat rapidly and seemed to choke him, and little pulses beat in unsuspected places. Then suddenly the clash of wheels on rocks came to him and the tramp of shod hoofs over stones. He whipped a big red neckerchief from his pocket and tied it across his face so that only his little red ferret-eyes gleamed evilly between the brim of his hat and the top of the mask as he forced his painted horse under the lee of a great boulder.

Then he saw the buckboard.

It was moving slowly along the crooked trail with the two half-broken ponies plunging restlessly against their collars while the pole jerked from side to side. With the reins wrapped around his wrists, Ellis fought for his horses' heads, both his feet on the squealing brakes as

they came down the steep incline. Close to his right hand a shotgun was holstered against the end of the seat ready to hand. On his left Tyler saw Biggs, his questing glance peering right and left along the trail for what he knew would happen.

Ellis leaning forward, his forked beard blowing behind him, wrestled with his fractious team. He was bent over their rumps when a painted horse leapt from behind a line of boulders. His frenzied leap under a vicious prod of the spur took him close to the off wheel of the buckboard and a sharp voice crackled out raspingly:

"Hands up! Both of you! Way up! up!"

The restive ponies sat suddenly back till their breeching cracked. Then Ellis's hands went slowly up. He had no recourse, for a heavy six-gun yawned in his face and behind that gun a pair of eyes twinkled menacingly above a red neckerchief. His hands went up, cursing steadily while every hair in his gray beard curled with wrath.

"Lower yore left hand. Unbuckle yore belt an' throw it out. One false move from either of you an' I shoot."

There was no help for it. Ellis never broke the torrent of his curses as he lowered his trembling left hand, unbuckled his belt and jerked it into the dust of the trail.

"Now you——"

Biggs, his hands also uplifted, followed suit. The masked man reached suddenly out, snatched the shotgun from the holster and dropped its muzzle in line to cover both men. Ellis, knowing that the gun was loaded with buckshot on top of two bullets, cringed a little to one side.

"Be damned keerful with that scatter-gun," he said coldly. "She's mighty easy on the trigger."

"Unhook that bag from the back of the seat and chuck it here."

The unarmed Ellis was long past resistance. It was no part of valour to fight for a bag of money that was already insured. With an additional curse he unfastened the heavy bag and heaved it over. The masked man swung it to his saddle pommel and made it fast with one hand, but his eyes never left his victims.

"Now turn yore team," he said, "an' head up the cañon the way you came."

In a moment it was done and for two miles their captor headed the team up the trail till it reached a point where a low arroyo cut the trail.

"Turn down the arroyo an' stop," he said.

Biggs wondered what was to happen. He soon got enlightenment. As the buckboard crashed to a halt a rasping voice called out:

"Get out now an' unhook the traces."

The men clambered slowly out. Ellis was long past speech but Biggs's wonder was excited. What did Tyler think he was doing? He should have made his get-away the moment the sack of gold was safe on his saddle.

"Take yore knives now an' cut the harness to pieces."

The man sat immovably in the shadows, but they could see a movement of the gun-muzzle. It told its own story, and even Biggs did not know just how far he could trust Tyler at large. They got out their knives and cut and hacked frenziedly at the leather till the harness lay in scraps.

"Now turn the ponies loose."

The freed horses headed down the trail at a trot that changed to a gallop.

"Now you kin go to hell. Both of you."

The masked man suddenly whirled his horse and departed in a clatter of small stones, and Ellis turned to Biggs.

"We've got to hoof it in to Drybone," he said grimly. "D'you git any idee who it is?"

"I ain't so derved sure," said Biggs. "He was masked up to the eyes."

"Huh! The horse wasn't masked. It's pretty dark, to be sure, but it's light enough for me to reco'nize that horse. Didn't you see him?"

"Sure I saw him. He was a pintado horse. I can swear to that."

"It sure was. Use your brains, Biggs. Who in Drybone rides a pintado horse with a white off hind-leg like that? Sam Boden! He never rides anything else. That man was Sam Boden, I tell you, just as sure as a gun's iron."

"I reckon you're right." Biggs thought for a moment and became excitedly sure. "Of course, it's Sam Boden," he said. "He's got a damned good reason for the hold-up, too."

"What's that?"

"Sam Boden's in a damned bad way," quoth Biggs. "He borrowed a lot of money on the Lyin' Cross ranch and he can't meet his notes. He ain't got the money. His hands have all quit on him and he's got to raise twenty-four or -five thousand dollars by the twentieth of the month. I happen to know that."

"He's took one hell of a way to git it," quoth Ellis. "He can't be busted. Why, man, he owns the Lyin' Cross."

"He won't own it after the twentieth of the month," said Biggs. "When his affairs are straightened out he won't be able to afford bed an' board."

"Huh! Let's hit out fer Drybone." Ellis forged ahead on the trail, picked up his belt and holster and started down the rocky track. As they came out on the lowest level where the lights of Drybone winked at them from the curtain of the night, he turned for a last remark.

"When I tell Sheriff Garwood what I know and you kin swear to," he said, "Sam Boden'll have no cause to worry about bed an' board fer twenty years er so. The county'll supply that. Let's get to Garwood's office and let me do the talkin'."

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CHAPTER IV

THE SHERIFF CALLS ON SAM

SHERIFF JIM GARWOOD rose tempestuously with a glance at the clock as the two men stormed into his office. Thirty. It was too late or too early for anything serious to have happened. He drew a breath of relief, but Ellis's first words nearly upset him.

"Jim!" he snapped. "Sam Boden on his pintado horse held up the stage to-night on the main trail. He dropped a gun on me and Biggs here and held us up. He got away with the cash we was bringin' to the bank."

"Who? Sam Boden? Why, Jerry, you're as locoed as a coyote. Sam Boden? No, sir. Not Sam." Garwood stared at them as at two escaped lunatics.

"You fool!" Biggs seized him by the shoulder and whirled him about. "Would Ellis here bring a charge like this unless he knows what he's talkin' about? You know better. He tells the truth. I was with him on the stage. I tell you we were held up by Sam Boden on his pintado horse in the cañon. He took the cash and got away with it. Twenty-five thousand in gold for the bank. You've got to do something. I tell you, Sheriff, we both of us recognized man and horse."

There was enough truth in his tone to spur Garwood to instant action. But first he needed more information.

"By God!" he said. "I believe you're wrong. How do you know it was Boden? Did you see him?"

"Of course we saw him," said Biggs hotly. "He was wearin' the same big red hanky he always wears around his neck so we didn't see his face. But the figure was Sam Boden and it was his old pintado horse. We couldn't mistake that, could we?"

Even Jim Garwood had to admit that they could not mistake the horse.

"What time was it?" he asked.

"Maybe an hour and a half ago."

"Was it dark then?"

"Gettin' kind of dusky but that pintado horse shows up like a fly in a pan o' milk. I tell you, Garwood, it was Sam Boden on his pintado horse."

Garwood thought rapidly. He knew from Elkins and from what he had heard at the bank that Boden was on his last legs financially. "But he had known Sam Boden for a generation. It was not humanly possible that Sam could have done this thing. There must be some explanation. Then other forces began to work. Jim Garwood was the kind of a man who hates to believe evil of people but who hates even worse to be the last to hear it.

"Of course, if you're both sure, I've got only my duty to do," he said. "But I want you to be mighty certain before I do it. Everybody knows old Sam owes more'n he kin pay right now. He owes you money, too, don't he?" He turned squarely on Biggs.

"He owes me more'n the Lyin' Cross is worth," said Biggs. "You're losin' time, Garwood. It was Sam Boden held us up, and every hour that you delay gives him that much more time to get away with the cash."

"Hold on! No man kin tell me my business. Who makes this formal charge? You, Ellis?"

"You bet yore life I do!" Ellis swung forward. "And when him and me meet we'll sure lock horns. Sheriff or no sheriff, I tell you, Jim Garwood, when I meet Sam Boden it'll be at the smokin' end of a shootin' iron."

Jim Garwood knew the old man meant what he said. He also knew the almost devilish precision of the six-gun in Sam Boden's holster. Ellis was not a fire-eater nor a killer, but neither was he one with whom one could trifle with impunity. He was a quick-tempered man with a grievance in a land where men shot out their troubles. And Sam Boden was worse.

"I'll get me some men," said Garwood briefly. "Wait here."

He was back in ten minutes with two men.

"The horses'll be here in a minute," he said. "I ain't lookin' for trouble, but you never can tell what you'll find at the Lyin' Cross. I got Burns and West to get the horses," he said.

In less than ten minutes the crash of shod hoofs told of the arrival and Garwood waved his men to horse. He knew there were only three men at the Lying Cross, for it was an open secret that the men had left the place. Sam, Chris and Look Chang, the Chinese cook, whom he mistakenly disregarded, were left. It was nearly midnight when they clattered out of Drybone and headed north across the windy levels for the jaws of the valley where the Lying Cross ranch-house stretched its ungainly length along the hill.

—Even at that late hour a lamp was burning in the office where Boden was poring over a pile of papers in the futile hope that he might find some loophole of escape that he had overlooked before. The noise of the mounted men

sounded in the stillness like the rush of an avalanche and made him start into sudden life. He thrust back his chair, picked a saddle-gun from a peg and blew out the light. He took no chances.

"Chang!" His voice rang through the house like a bugle call.

"All lile. My come quick."

If Jim Garwood had had a cat's eye he might have seen in Look Chang's hand a heavy hatchet. Look Chang had been through two Tong wars in San Francisco, where a hatchet is highly approved of as a lethal weapon.

"Who's there and what do you want?"

"It's me, Boden. Sheriff Jim Garwood."

"Huh!" Boden stepped out upon the porch. "What does this mean, Garwood?"

"I've come on business, Sam. A charge has been filed against you."

"What? What charge? What're you talkin' about? What liar makes a charge against me?"

"Trap Rock Ellis and Biggs swear you held up the stage to-night. They've sworn you pulled a gun on 'em an' robbed the Exton stage of twenty-five thousand in gold coin."

"What's that?" Boden's voice then cracked like a rifle-shot. "Say that again, Sheriff!"

Garwood said it again, moving forward a little so that Boden's quick glance caught the men behind him spreading out in anticipation of having to rush the house. His rifle-muzzle dropped forward in line with his left foot and Garwood from the corner of his eye saw Look Chang spit on his hands and shift his grip on his hatchet. Sam Boden suddenly hailed them:

"Keep back, Garwood! You're at least an honest

man. So's Trap Rock Ellis. If he said I held up the stage he believed it, but that man Biggs'd rob his dead mother. Was Biggs on the stage?"

"Yes—I——"

"Then he's the man you want. Not me. What evidence have you got that connects me with the affair?"

Garwood told him briefly while his men fidgeted behind him and Biggs cursed futilely in the background.

"They both swear it was you on your pintado horse," he said.

Sam Boden started to speak. Then he stopped suddenly. A sudden blow in the face could not have astonished him more. He realized that he could not explain. Chris was riding that pintado horse. Chris knew his need for twenty-five thousand dollars! For just a brief second the thought came to him that Chris knowing the need for money had . . . before the thought formed he rejected it.

"Where's your pintado horse?" demanded Garwood. "Let's have a look at him, if you don't mind."

Sam's heart gave a great leap. Chris was riding that horse and no possible explanation could be given. They would simply shift the charge from him to Chris, and that would be worse than ever. He must get rid of these men before Chris came back.

"Where's your horse?" demanded Garwood again.

"None o' your damned business," snapped Boden. "I can prove by Look Chang here that I have not left the ranch in twelve hours an'——"

"I'll just take a look around."

Garwood came forward.

"You will like hell," snapped Boden. "If you had a

search-warrant, even, you can't serve. You know as well as I do that a search-warrant can't be served between dark an' daylight. You haven't got a warrant, anyhow. You go back home, Garwood, and get a warrant and come out by daylight and you can search to your heart's content. But not to-night."

"Yeah!" Biggs crowed throatily. "Come back at daylight and find you've got away with the stolen cash. Don't be a fool, Garwood. Don't you see he's just stallin' for time?"

That was exactly what Sam Boden was doing, but for a reason very different from that Biggs suggested. Again Garwood swung forward.

"Warrant or no warrant, Sam, I reckon I'll just take a look in your stable."

He turned away, followed by his men and by Biggs, who was grinning at the success of his plans. Old Sam's voice, curt, incisive, cut the hush.

"One minute, Sheriff. We've been friends for years, so I'm warnin' you now. I'm one man against your seven, but as God's my judge, I'll kill the first man who starts to search my place without a formal warrant, properly served at the right time. The moment a man sets hand on latch or lock I shoot to kill. And you know me, Garwood."

Garwood did know him, and he felt a little shiver run down his back as he stared at Sam in the misty moonlight.

Sam never made idle threats. He knew, too, that he had no legal right on the Lying Cross without a warrant. There was but one thing to do and he did it.

"Here, Ellis. You started this. It's up to you to finish it." He grabbed Ellis by the arm. "You get back to

Drybone and swear out a warrant, and tell 'em I say Mike Fisher is to serve it at daylight. I'll stay right here to see that nothin' is removed. That suit you, Boden?" he asked. "Any objection to our stayin' here?"

"You can go to hell as far as I'm concerned," quoth Boden. "If that man Biggs wasn't with you I'd ask the bunch in to have coffee and a bite, but not now. A man who sits in with skunks ain't fit to mix with men."

He walked back to the porch and sat down with his rifle across his knees. At a sudden thought he rose and entered the house.

"Chang," he called softly.

"Yah. W'at you want?" Look Chang came forward grinning.

"Chang, can you manage to slip out the back way and get into the stable? I want you to get in the back way and fasten all the doors and windows so that bunch can't get in the stables."

Sam did not propose to have those men discover till the last minute the absence of the pintado horse. Chang, who saw more than Sam realized, grinned again and chuckled.

"Yah! My can do," he said. "My stay in stable till daylight. No let man come inside. No wantchee man see Chlis come back, huh?"

"That's it exactly, Chang. They say I held up the stage and robbed it of a lot of money, Chang. They say I rode my pintado horse. You know Chris has got that horse. See that nobody gets in the stable, Chang."

Chang nodded indifferently and passed into the kitchen. Sam heard him clashing among his pans and at the drawer where he kept his cutlery. Then he saw a dim shape flit

out the back way, and a vague form drifted down the back lane and over towards the stables. When he saw that shape drop out of sight, Sam turned his attention to the man in his front yard.

Those men, half laughing, half angry at their reception, tied their ponies to the racks and waited. Ellis could not get back till daylight—a wait of four hours. They did not blame Boden much, though they cursed him genially. After all, a man had some rights left. If Boden was guilty he was within his rights. If he was innocent, they did not blame him at all for resenting the way Garwood had gone at the matter. Garwood, they reflected, was a fool. So for two full hours they smoked and talked among themselves. Finally Biggs drew Sheriff Garwood aside.

“You keep your men here where Boden can see them,” he whispered. “He won’t miss one man in the dusk. I’m goin’ to slip over to the stable and take a look inside.”

“Sure,” Garwood grunted. “But even if his horse ain’t there, it don’t prove anything. I’m beginnin’ to believe old Sam’s guilty as hell.”

Biggs gave a grunt that might have meant anything.

“He is,” he growled. “Ellis told you the truth. Boden needed the money and he took the easiest way to get it. He just didn’t think there’d be a passenger on the stage, and the evidence of one witness wouldn’t convict him. I’m goin’ over there to the stables now.”

The next moment the dusk swallowed him up as he drifted over towards the dim shape of the stables. That stable was a big, formless building. It had stabling for forty horses and had doors and small windows on all four sides. Biggs slipped around the corner and paused by a

closed door. Suddenly he realized that mere idle curiosity had taken him there. He was not at all interested in that pintado horse. But——

A sudden thought leapt into his mind. Why was Boden so anxious to keep them from looking for that horse? He must have some reason. There might be more to it than he, Biggs, first believed. He paused by a closed door.

Where was Chris Boden? That thought staggered him. If Chris were at the Lying Cross, they would certainly have seen him. Had Chris gone somewhere on that pintado, somewhere that Sam Boden wished kept secret? It was a very simple thing to see if that horse was in the stable.

There was no lock on the door. There was a hole six inches in diameter through which one ran his hand to reach the bolt that held the door. He thrust his hand through the hole and fumbled for a moment at the clumsy bolt. The next moment a dull thud was followed by a piercing shriek—a shriek so shrill, so piercing, so wholly terrifying as it rose and swelled on the night air that the tethered horses broke from the tie-racks snorting and squealing, and the more startled men, after a scared look at each other and at Jim Garwood, broke for the stables. Garwood reached it first.

Biggs leaned against the door. By the first faint light of the false dawn staining the sky they saw that his white face was streaked with sweat and his breath came gaspingly. His right arm was thrust through the hole in the door and he pressed against it as though in pain. At Garwood's pull, Biggs broke into a shriek. Then Boden's voice cut the hush. "I told you what'd happen if you tried to search without a warrant. Wait, you fools! I'll

see what's the matter, but I'll kill the man who goes in there."

He ran into the stable by a back door, took one look and whistled softly. Biggs's hand had closed over that wooden bolt, and by the growing light Boden saw that that hand was pinned fast to the heavy door by a long, slim knife that was driven through the back of the hand into the heavy boards.

"Chang," he muttered grimly. Then with a quick pull he jerked out the knife. The arm withdrew quickly and Boden opened the door.

"He stuck his hand in a trap," he said grimly. "Anybody else want a taste of it?"

Garwood, eyeing him angrily, held up a hand.

"Here's Ellis with Mike Fisher and the warrant," he said. "Hear him?"

The *thud-thud* of galloping hoofs broke the silence of the dawn. The next minute Garwood's voice rang out above the sound of the running feet.

"It's Chris Boden," he said sharply. "On Sam's pintado horse. No wonder Sam wouldn't let us see inside the stable. Chris Boden's been out on his father's horse. He's the one that did the job. Look."

The big pintado swung in at the gate and slid to a halt and Jim Garwood at a leap was alongside him, and as Chris swung out of the saddle he was almost knocked over by the quick rush of the eager deputies as Sheriff Garwood laid a threatening hand on his arm.

"Chris Boden," he said grimly, "I arrest you for holdin' up the Exton stage and for robbin' it of twenty-five thousand dollars in gold last night."

Chris shook himself loose and laughed.

"Been drinkin', Sheriff?" he demanded. "Give me a

touch of the same. You're as crazy as I always said you were."

"Crazy or not," said Garwood, "you're my prisoner. You kin explain to a jury whether you're a plain fool or just a common thief."

Then Chris Boden knocked him flat.

CHAPTER V

HELD TO ANSWER

THREE crazy deputies threw themselves on Chris while Garwood felt his head to see if it had been jarred loose. A whirling cocoon of fighting men revolved about Chris as a pivot reeling about the yard till a grey-bearded tornado dropped upon them from the porch. That tornado was followed by a blazing-eyed Chinaman with a ready hatchet.

At sight of Sam's gun that cocoon unwove and Chris, with torn clothes, his face scratched and bleeding, and his eyes blazing, faced them. His father spoke first.

"Where've you been, son?" he asked quietly.

"Just where you sent me, sir," said Chris, who had never in his life dropped the habit of saying "sir" to his father.

"Nowhere else? You haven't been up the cañon toward Exton?"

"Not within twenty miles of it, dad."

"All right." Sam turned to Garwood. "Are you satisfied?" he asked.

"Me? Satisfied? By a simple denial by a guilty man? You're crazy. He'll come with me."

"You bet your sweet life he will," said Sam. "So will I. Chang, you get fresh horses for us." He turned to the staring Look Chang. "And you stay here till we come back. Now, Sheriff, I'm at your service. What's the game?"

"To take you an' your son to Drybone and formally charge him with the hold-up of the stage. What happens after that ain't my business," said Garwood. "Will you go quietly, Boden?"

"Sheriff!" Chris raised a minatory hand. "You say a hold-up's been pulled off. What proof is there? Who was robbed?"

"Trap Rock Ellis was drivin' the Exton stage," said Garwood. "He was robbed of twenty-five thousand dollars. A man on your father's pintado horse held up the stage and got away with the cash. Your father needed just that amount. He wouldn't let us search the stable for his horse. You were identified by the horse you rode. Biggs here was with Ellis and he saw you."

"Who? Biggs? Good God, man! I wouldn't hang a skung on Biggs's evidence. Why, man, that flannel-faced liar can't tell the truth even when it's to his own advantage to do it. Trap Rock Ellis at least is honest, but Biggs——"

Chris turned away with a grunt of healthy disgust that made his father chuckle.

"I'll go quietly," he said. "Come on, dad."

In a few minutes Look Chang brought up the horses and stood wondering as the little crowd jostled out of the gate and, with Biggs nursing his wounded hand, headed across the dusty flats for Drybone.

When they filed into the office of the Justice of the Peace, the evidence of Trap Rock Ellis was clear cut and definite. The hold-up was described in terms as clear cut as a cameo. The hearers could see all the details. The bank officials testified that twenty-five thousand dollars in gold was expected.

Ellis testified that he had had it and that the man on

the pintado horse had taken it. Both Ellis and Biggs testified, and when the testimony was all in John Lucas, the Justice of the Peace, cleared the court and announced his decision. There was evidence enough to hold Chris for trial, but he would admit him to bail. Elkins was more than willing to sign the bail bond, so when that formality was completed Chris walked out from the court a free man.

As he forced his way through the crowd the temper of the public, fanned to fever heat by Biggs by intention, by Trap Rock Ellis from sheer stupidity, and by Jeff Tyler from personal animosity, was evident. Tyler had never forgotten nor forgiven the incident in the bar-room of the Blue Front and now he had a part of his revenge. A whisper aside that Chris Boden had robbed the Exton stage made men eye Chris with obvious intent. A sudden growl went up as Sam and Chris passed to their horses.

"Good fer you, Biggs. Maybe now we know who's the head of the Nighthawks!"

Chris shot a sudden glance at the speaker. Nighthawks! He realized suddenly that the fear of those men, of that organization—for he knew now that it was an organization—lay in every mind.

Father and son stopped at the tie-rack where Sam's pintado horse was the centre of a gaping circle. All the drama of the hold-up focused in that pintado, and he seemed to know it. He was a magnificent animal, all of sixteen hands, glossy brown where he was not white, and Sam Boden loved him only a little less than he loved Chris. He stepped to the rack, patted the glossy neck, untied the tie-rope and looped it over the saddle-horn.

"Better see a lawyer first, I reckon," said Sam. "Keep

back, damn you, I tell you!" He turned on the crowd surging at his heels. The temper of that crowd was evident. "Come on, Chris. They're turnin' ugly. We don't want to hurt anyone to get clear."

"You bet you don't."

A man hurled a rock at them that barely missed Chris's head to shatter on the steel saddle-horn. He pitched into saddle and an iron hand fell on his left foot and lifted. It was the old grip that the English Life Guards know, the grip that many a hoodlum has used to hurl from the saddle the unsuspecting horseman. It is very simple, a grip of the near ankle, a sudden lift with all the weight of the lifter, and the rider caught unprepared is catapulted from his saddle. There is no guard for that lift, but there is a tremendous ripost. Chris Boden had never heard of it, but his action was instinctive.

He let his left leg go limp in his attacker's grip. It swung up and across the horse's back behind the saddle-cantle. He pivoted on his right stirrup and the moment the lift ceased, the left leg came back. At the same instant he snatched his heavy-six gun from the open holster and its steel-shod butt crashed down on the defenceless head of his attacker. The man dropped like a log and the crowd surged over him.

There was neither fair-play nor sanity in that crowd. Some one passed the word 'Nighthawk' and no more was needed. The mere hint that one of those nameless, unknown, secret harpies was at last known as enough.

"Come on, son."

Sam drove his spurs into the rowel-seats and sent his pintado at the crowd. It broke like a stream of mercury on an amalgam table and Sam Boden, with Chris behind him, plunged down the street, followed by Tyler and

Biggs, still nursing his wounded hand. They meant to watch father and son till they were out of Drybone.

Down the street they went at a trot, too proud to run, too wise to stop, and they turned left at the first alley. That alley led from street to street and passed along the side of the shack in which Jeff Tyler lived, next to the bigger bungalow where Biggs held forth when he was not at the Blue Front. As Sam followed Chris into the alley, Tyler behind them, riding in rear of Biggs, called out in a low, breathless tone.

"Hell!" he said curtly. "Stop 'em somehow, Biggs. They mustn't go this way. If they go down past my house the fat's in the fire. Stop 'em, I tell you."

"What? How in hell kin I stop 'em?" Biggs snarled over his shoulder. His hand ached and pained and he was furious that Sam and Chris had been released on bail. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"My horse! Ypur horse, I mean. The one I rode last night. He's in my yard. I tied him there so the paint would dry so I could clean it off."

"Good God!" Biggs was appalled. This might mean the utter ruin of his plan. "You fool!" he hissed. "You damn fool!"

He exploded in a futile burst of rage. If Sam Boden and Chris should see that horse that was painted to resemble Sam's pintado! If they had time to notice! He dared not think of what might happen. There was only one way: to hurry them down that alley and to take their attention. He snatched his six-gun from its holster and cursed as his wounded hand almost refused to function.

He should have known that neither Sam Boden nor Chris were gun-shy. That shot fired with the crazy hope

of stampeding the two, brought very different results. Sam's big pintado whirled on his haunches and Sam's grey eyes, blazing with wrath, stared straight at Biggs over a six-gun that leapt by magic into Sam's hand. But before the itching trigger finger had time to close, a breathless shout from Chris made Sam turn in his saddle.

"Look, dad! Look, I tell you! There's the double of your pintado horse."

Sam's gaze followed Chris's pointing finger. There in the yard, only a few yards away, stood a brown-and-white pintado horse, an exact duplicate of the big pintado that Sam bestrode.

For a long second Sam doubted his eyes. Then like a flash sudden realization came. He whirled his horse and thrust his gun-muzzle almost into Biggs's face. Biggs threw up his arm to protect his eyes. The next second Sam snatched the six-gun from Biggs's wounded hand and flung it over the fence.

"Off your horses, the pair of you!" Sam's voice fairly snapped. "Off—quick—before I shoot you off," he said. "If you make a false move I'll kill you like the lyin' dogs you are. Take Tyler, Chris," he added sharply.

But Chris already had Tyler. He jerked him sideways from the saddle, his knee against the girth, and he flung him like a meal sack into the litter of the alley.

"I see it all now, dad," he said quickly. "That's Biggs's horse. Take 'em in the yard, dad."

Sam herded the two into the yard. One move for escape from either of them would have been the signal for that heavy gun to vomit death, and Biggs and Tyler knew it. Sam gave only a cursory glance at the horse, but what he saw told him all.

"Take that horse just the way he stands," he said.

"If you rub any paint off him, I'll kill you. I aim to show Sheriff Garwood and the law just what's been done. Both of you start down the street with that horse. If you aim to see how fast a bullet kin go—just try to run."

Tyler whispered hurriedly to Biggs, who listened grimly and gave a quick nod. Then Tyler turned to Sam.

"Listen, Boden," he said quickly. "You got us wrong. You drop that gun and it's twelve thousand dollars in yore poke and nothin' said."

Chris gasped. It was fairly clear now. Biggs and Tyler had robbed the Exton stage! But he doubted his senses as he heard his father say:

"Twelve thousand, huh? That ain't much, but it's sure better 'n a year in jail. Where is it?"

"We've got it all right."

"You've got to show me first."

"Come on, then." This time Biggs took charge. "Follow me," he said.

"All right. But mind you——" There was a ring and snap to Sam Boden's voice that carried complete conviction to his hearers. "One slip from either of you and I'll kill you both. I know now who the head of the Nighthawks is, I'm thinkin'. Now where's that cash?"

"In the house. Come on."

Biggs drew a breath of relief. He should have remembered how Sam Boden needed money. He fell in behind Tyler, who led the way into the kitchen. When the room door closed, Tyler went straight to the little pot-bellied iron stove, pulled out a heap of papers and ashes and finally threw out upon the floor the bag that had been taken from the Exton stage.

"Half is yours, Boden."

Tyler looked up and started to open the bag, but Sam stopped him.

"We'll leave it to Garwood to open it," he said quietly. "Pick up that bag, Tyler. God help you if you try to run. You'll go straight this time for once in your slimy life. Straight for two hundred yards."

The two scoundrels stared at each other appalled. They had not believed such a conclusion was possible. To face Sheriff Garwood with this damning evidence against them meant but one thing. It was jail for twenty years—at least.

With an inarticulate oath Biggs made a leap for the door but Sam tripped him and before Biggs knew what had happened he was prone on his face with a gun-muzzle on the back of his neck. He turned his head far enough to get a glimpse of the fierce eyes above that gun. Then he lay suddenly still as though paralysed. At the same moment Tyler even more foolishly leapt for Chris's throat.

It was his only chance for safety and he tried it. Equally agile but twenty pounds heavier, Chris side-stepped and struck with all his force with his gun-barrel at Tyler's head. The heavy gun caught him squarely along the top of the head and with a sickening crash he went down among the ashes from the stove.

"I hope I've killed him."

But Chris bent over him and tore loose coat and shirt to see if his heart still beat.

"What the devil's this?" he said quickly. "Something else he's stolen, I suppose."

He pulled from Tyler's breast-pocket a square tin box about an inch deep and three inches square, and

while Tyler squirmingly came back to consciousness Chris opened the box. There was nothing in it more dangerous than a stamp pad and a rubber stamp, but when Chris looked at that stamp he ripped out a sudden oath.

"Look here, dad. Look!" he said.

"You've got to show me later on, son. I'm busy right now. Wait till I hog-tie this coyote. Hand me a piece of that rope."

Chris jerked three feet from an old lariat and tossed it to his father, who swiftly and scientifically jerked Biggs's hands behind him and tied them fast. Then he turned to Chris:

"What you got to show me, son?" he asked.

"It's the stamp that was on those two notes we got," said Chris. "It's the signature of the Nighthawks. No man ever knew who they were. No man ever knew who's been responsible for the robbery and the looting and the burnin's that have taken place. I'm thinkin' we know now. Biggs and Tyler are at the head of those damned Nighthawks."

"Up with you!" Sam fairly jerked Biggs to his feet and with Tyler nursing his aching head they passed out into the alley.

"Take that painted horse. Never mind ours, Chris; they'll stand. Garwood'll be interested in this work of art. Now, Biggs, hustle!"

Garwood, summoned from his dinner, waxed wroth, but his manner changed when Sam Boden explained and pointed to the painted horse. The look on the face of the old frontier sheriff changed from wrath to surprise and then to wrath again; to the anger of a stupidly just man who has had a man take advantage of his stupidity.

He lifted the leather sack and weighed it carefully. Then he sent for Trap Rock Ellis, and Biggs spoke for the first time.

"I want counsel," he said hoarsely. "It's my right. Somebody git John Lucas for me."

Lucas and the ensuing conference took most of the afternoon, and it was near supper-time when the affair was settled.

"I'm goin' to turn you loose," said Garwood to the two sweating men. "But I warn you that if you try to leave you'll be pinched for what you've done. I'll report the matter to the Judge and let him do what he chooses. I'll get Judge Gedge by phone right now."

Judge Gedge over the phone gave curt but definite instructions. And when he hung up the instrument Garwood turned to Biggs.

"Ten and fifteen thousand dollars bail for grand jury action," he said. "Kin you git it?"

Elkins nodded agreement. He dared not refuse. Then Jim Garwood stood up.

"I hope this here grand jury'll demand a clean bill o' health about them damned Nighthawks," he said. "There's been too much robbin' and rustlin' and such around here. I'm thinkin' you and Chris kin give some valuable testimony. I'm goin' to see to it that the matter is thrashed out completely. Good night, Sam, and I'm sure much obliged. You kept me from makin' a fool of myself."

"And that," said Chris as they got to their horses, "is the end of a perfect day. It's a whole lot different, dad, from what I expected when we left home this

"I'd like to believe this matter of the Nighthawks is

over," said his father heavily. "I'm too darned old, son, to enjoy these doin's. I know Biggs and I know Tyler. They're worse 'n water-moccasins. They're most dangerous when they're quiet. Come on, son. Let's hurry. Look Chang'll have supper waitin' for us."

CHAPTER VI

FIREWORKS AT THE LYING CROSS

BEDLAM broke loose that night in Drybone. It was Saturday night and every outlying ranch and mine had sent its delegation to town for the pay-day spree. By noon the public knew of the hold-up and by night a mob was ready to take any action. The Blue Front liquor was potent and there were plenty of advisors. Later when Biggs and Tyler were released on bail the climax came.

Men were there from the 'far Amatgo ranges, men from Blud Valley, and many of them had paid tribute in some form at some time to the Nighthawks. Its personnel was unknown. That mob was dangerous and Biggs and Tyler knew it. Biggs almost rushed Tyler into the room behind the Blue Front, smashed a bottle to the table before them and broke into sweating speech.

"By God," he said, "things can't be worse. Those damned Bodens have got the dope on us. They know now who's been milkin' the county for years. If they ever git a chance to tell a jury what they know, it'll do more 'n just put you and me away for twenty years. That crowd'll lynch us as sure as God made li'l apples. We got to do somethin' and do it quick. The man we got to see is John Lucas. If he can't get us out o' this mess nobody can."

Drybone was just a small cow-town, the county seat, to be sure, but important only twice a year—when cattle

were shipped and when court met. The two generally took place at the same time.

John Lucas did not have many jury cases. He settled most of his cases out of court, thereby keeping the friendship of both sides. But now when Biggs and Tyler sought him out he saw a chance for what he had never had before—publicity! No man can resist that. John Lucas, counsel for hard-working men who stood accused before their peers of heinous crimes, would be head-line stuff in the big papers. John Lucas had got bail from Elkins for Biggs and Tyler. It was John Lucas who met them at the door of his office and was closeted with them in debate.

"Of course you realize," he said, "that if this case comes to trial as matters stand, with the evidence that Boden and his son can give, you're just as good as wearin' striped suits."

Biggs rubbed his hairy hands together and sweated gently, and Tyler passed his tongue along his dry lips.

"Twenty years in stir at least," said Lucas reflectively. "And it all hangs on the testimony of Sam Boden and his son Chris."

That brought Biggs suddenly to life.

"I might offer Boden to return that note to him," he said.

Lucas shook his head.

"There are several reasons against it," he said. "If Boden refused it would be a bribe. That'd make your offence worse. Boden will welcome a chance to soak you like that. Second, if Boden got that note back he'll stay on the Lyin' Cross and he'll be a constant menace to you as long as he lives. And third and most important of all"—he grinned a little at this—"I'm countin' on that

note for twenty-four thousand dollars as a part o' my fee."

"*A part!* Good Lord, man! How much are you goin' to charge us for this affair?"

"The equivalent of twenty years free board with interest at the usual rate," said Lucas briskly. "If I were you, Biggs, I wouldn't dream of payin' Boden to disappear. I'd just see that he does it. Can you think of any way to ensure that?"

Biggs and Tyler grinned at each other knowingly. Neither answered.

"Oh, you needn't mind telling me. You're safe. I know who's been head of the Nighthawks. Have you got a list of the men who belong?"

Tyler nodded curtly.

"Of course," he said. "Me and Biggs have each got a list. That's how we kept in touch with 'em."

"How was it done?"

"If we wanted a meetin' of the gang Biggs would send a bill for liquor bought at the Blue Front. When a man got a bill for seven dollars he knew it was a notice for a meetin'. That's all."

"What did you use the stamp for?"

"It gave an official air to the papers. It always scared men into payin'."

"An anonymous letter usually does," said Lucas dryly.

"Don't you see what you're up against? Just as soon as it's known that Sam Boden has got the goods on you, every man on your list will be tryin' to turn State's evidence to get immunity. You'll have forty witnesses against you two."

Biggs, watching him, let go a great oath.

"That's enough," he said. "I know what we've got

to do. Come on, Jeff," he said hoarsely. "We're wastin' time here!"

- Lucas whirled him about with a frenzied grip on his arm.

"Mind you," he said, "you've got to have an alibi for what you do. A cast-iron alibi. You must be able to account for every hour."

"Come on," said Biggs hoarsely. "We got no time to lose."

With Tyler trailing him, he headed straight for his office behind the Blue Front. The crowd at the bar dropped apart in silence as they passed, sure sign that they had been talking about them. Biggs passed straight into the back room and slammed the door. Then he turned viciously on his companion.

"See Bryce an' Lyman and Letter," he said quickly. "They're all we kin get. They were mixed up in firin' the alfalfa crops at Crixton last year. An' Letter was the man we had when we killed off the Flyin' Y herd. They daren't squeal. Six of us 'll be enough to handle two men."

"You can't scare old Boden outen the country," said Tyler.

"Who wants to? When I'm through with Sam Boden he won't give any testimony. Ner his bean-pole son, neither. Get the men. And don't let anyone see you or know what you're doin'."

One by one Tyler picked up his men; Letter at the court-house, Bryce at the Blue Front bar, the others in different places. They came scared and they listened eagerly to what Biggs had to say, and when he stopped to wipe the sweat from his face—yet the day was cool—Letter, moving towards the door, spoke over his shoulder.

"There's only one answer," he said. "Damned if I'm goin' to jail to please Sam Boden. How about you all?"

They all nodded agreement. They knew well what he meant. One man asked a question hoarsely:

"What time and where?"

"Right here and ten o'clock. Who'll do it?"

"All of us. This is no one man's job. Biggs, you an' Tyler have got to come, too. Damned if we'll take a chance on havin' you double-cross us as I know you will if you git a chance. Ten o'clock right here."

When they left the place Biggs gave vent to a blast of profanity that shook the windows. It was no part of his plan to visit the Lying Cross that night, but he could not help doing so. He turned suddenly on Tyler.

"Git Doc Barrett," he said curtly. "Tell him I'm sick. He's mostly half full by this time. Tell him to come quick."

Dr Barrett came under a protest that availed him naught at all. A six-gun in the small of his back proved a potent persuader. Biggs met him in the office back of the bar.

"Listen, Doc, I expect you to swear to-morrow if you have to that you seen me to-night and that I'm so sick that I couldn't leave my bed. I want an alibi. *Sabe* that?"

"I——I——"

"All right. Never mind. I'm thinkin' the District Attorney'll be interested in who gave Jim Went dope the night his barn went up in fire. Never mind."

"Don't be a fool," said Barrett gruffly. "Of course I know you're a sick man. Stay in bed all night. I'll see you about midnight? That do?"

"Sure. Take a drink an' go 'home, Doc, an'—remember."

• Barrett took the drink and staggered out. This was what he got for a moment of weakness years before.

Biggs was right in his conjecture. When Sam Boden, with Chris beside him, rode into the corral of the Lying Cross he was in a rare good humour. The first for many days. Look Chang welcomed them with a grin. Even from the kitchen windows he could tell that events had taken a fortunate turn and his specially prepared supper expressed his satisfaction. Supper over, Sam filled his pipe and watched Chris moving restlessly about the room.

What a son Chris was! Able, clean, decent, just the kind of a son a man wanted to take up his work after him; to marry a fine woman and pass on the name to a son like him in every respect. Ever since his wife had died, old Sam had been father and mother, too, to the lonely little boy, and he had jealously watched him grow into just the kind of a man that his mother would have wished.

"Hey, son. What're you after with that gun?" he demanded sharply as Chris took a saddle-gun from a peg, filled the magazine and set it in a corner.

"I'm not takin' chances, dad. We euchred those people to-day, but they won't stay euchred. They've got to do something and do it quick if they want to stay out o' jail."

"Shucks, boy. This is the present day. Men don't kill their enemies to-day."

"Biggs and Jeff Tyler and their stripe do—when they can. Didn't we identify both men as members of that damned gang of the Nighthawks? Haven't they

been concerned in every rotten deal for two years about here? How long will it be before Biggs and his gang take steps to keep you and me from testifyin' against 'em?"

Look Chang, clashing among his pans, stared at Chris with a new-born respect as he muttered something. Sam laughed.

"Hear what Chang said?" he asked. "He said: 'A young cock must show his spurs.'"

Chris grinned and tossed a cigarette to Chang, who caught it deftly.

"That man Biggs will try something," he said slowly. "We'd better be prepared."

"He doesn't dare."

Look Chang stepped to the window and came swiftly back.

"My people say," he said in a quick tone, "'A man riding a tiger dares not dismount.' My *sabe* Biggs. Him all bad. No good stay here."

"Listen!" Chris raised a warning hand. "Listen, I say!"

The night was full of noises. Horses in the corral stamped and whinnied. A high wind rushed through the cottonwoods in alternate gusts and silences and the falling leaves pattered on the porch roof. The broad valley was bathed in the misty moonlight, and great masses of wind-clouds drifted athwart the moon, throwing alternate light and wind-driven shadow over the land.

After, a coyote answered another till the night was full of the yelling. Suddenly it stopped and in the wind-beaten silence they heard the *thud-thud* of galloping hoofs.

"By God," said Chris suddenly, "Chang is right. 'A man riding a tiger dares not dismount.' That'll be our friend Biggs, sure."

He blew out the lamp as his father snatched a rifle from the rack and tested bolt and follower. The next moment the gate crashed open and lay in a heap of broken timbers and a wild rush of mounted men swept up the level space before the house.

A sharp, spiteful crack—a handful of sparks from old Sam's shoulder as his rifle spat its challenge and a bullet whined high overhead.

"That'll give 'em time to think."

Sam blew through the open breech of his rifle as the crowd sucked suddenly back. Then his voice rang out, a menace in each word:

"What're you-all doin' rushin' my place at this time o' night?" he demanded.

Incautiously he stepped into the doorway as he hailed them. Three shots answered him. Before the echoes died Chris's rifle spat a mouthful of sparks into the blackness and a horse dropped in the yard with a shrill scream of terror. Instantly the crowd scattered and the horses plunged about the place while the frenzied men sought cover.

"Eight of 'em." Chris peered through the open window. "Keep well back in the shadow, dad. Can you make out who they are?"

"I don't seem to care a damn who they are," growled Sam. "If my rifle-sights line on one of 'em he's my meat. You keep the front of the house. I'll take the rear. They haven't had time to scatter much yet. They're the Night-hawks o' course."

"Sure. And they hoped to catch us asleep and burn

the place over our heads, I reckon. The damned murderers! What is it, Chang?"

Look Chang, inarticulate with excitement, sputtered curses as he thrust into Chris's hands a paper package.

"My ketchum long time ago," he said excitedly. "My ketchum San F'lisco town make joss to Kwanh Su. Maybe so Chinese god like boom-boom. You makee light all same cigarette."

He struck a match and held out the package.

"Catch fire to 'em and set fire to horses," he said. "They no can stay then."

"It can't hurt to try it." Chris set his rifle against the wall. "Let's have a try anyhow. This package needs weight if I'm to throw it."

He tied an iron bootjack to it; soaked the paper in oil from the lamp and struck a match. The flame licked up in a smoky whirl. When it burned clear, he hurled the flaming mass out among the horses and while that package was still in the air the thing happened. The flames bit through the oil-soaked paper and as it struck the ground a dozen minor fires and little explosions broke out.

"Good God! Look at that, will you?"

Sam grasped Chris's arm and pointed. Look Chang had given Chris all his supply of firecrackers and explosives that for the past year he had collected to burn 'joss' to his gods. Little fiery serpents and wriggling fiery snakes shot across the yard under the feet of the horses, exploding under their very noses. Green and red and white flames sprang into life. One chased Cantwell across the corral, lay down with him behind the water-trough and set fire to his chaps. A flurry of squeals from the horses answered it as the horses, crazy with fright, broke in a surging mass from the enclosure.

"An' that"—Sam blew through the open breech of his rifle—"opens the game. It takes a pair o' jacks to open; I reckon, son. An'—there comes the jack o' spades."

A man stepped forward into the moonlight.

CHAPTER VII

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE

THE Lying Cross was ill-adapted for defence. The frame house gave cover but no protection, and every shot smashed through walls and doors as through paper.

"They're bunchin' over by the water-tank, dad."

Chris pointed to a big iron tank. It stood four feet high and was filled with water and gave perfect shelter to men behind it. Shot after shot fired from both sides of it kept father and son on the alert.

"Biggs is there himself," said Chris suddenly.

"How do you know? You can't see him, can you?"

"Biggs is left-handed," said Chris. "Only a left-handed man could shoot from behind the left side of that tank. Sure it's Biggs."

"Good. Now we know what we're up against. Tyler's along with him, of course. You're right, son. It's those double-damned Nighthawks. And it looks like they mean business this time, too. They can't afford to take a chance on lettin' us get away."

An icy hand seemed to grip at Chris's heart as the truth came suddenly home to him. His father was right. This fight must be to a finish. These men of the Nighthawks could not afford to let them get away. Biggs was there and almost certainly Tyler, too, and every man who was with them announced by his mere presence his membership in the Nighthawks. They had stirred up a hornets' nest indeed. His father motioned to him to keep back

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE 75

from the windows and spoke in a low tone, quick—sharp—decided.

• “If we’re goin’ to get away, son,” he said, “we’ve got to do it while it’s still dark. You see what we’re up against. They’ve got to wipe us out if they can to save their own hides. If we escape they go to jail. See?”

“Of course! But——”

“But, hell! There ain’t any but,” said his father. “We’ve got to get out. And we’ve got to do it before they scatter so’s to cover front and rear of the house.”

That was obvious. Any escape must be made before daylight gave clear vision, and the east was already beginning to lighten with the first touch of the false dawn. There were four entrances to the ranch-house of the Lying Cross: the front door, the great kitchen entrance that was used by Look Chang almost exclusively, a much-used side-door that led to the stables from the northern side of the house, and a smaller one on the south side that opened into an adobe-walled enclosure where, years before, Chris’s mother had optimistically tried to raise flowers.

Sam and Chris had kept the place up after her death, and the walls and fences were clothed with masses of heavy vines. If they could reach the shelter of those vines, they could get unseen into the deep arroyo that led down to the stables. In the arroyo they could reach the horses and make their getaway. But it must be done quickly and at once.

“Their stampeded horses will be bunched down where the wire fence blocks the arroyo,” said Chris quickly. “If we can’t get our own ponies we’ll take theirs. Can you see any of ’em now, dad?”

"My can seel"

Look Chang seized him by the arm and pointed to the yard. The moonlight was already dying, killed by the growing dawn, and by that grey-silver light Chris saw one or two shadowy shapes down by the stables. Their intention was clear. Men at the old windmill and others at the sun-dial on the south-eastern side could cover all four faces of the house and prevent the escape of the inmates.

If they were to escape they must do so before the light was strong enough for accurate shooting. Already two men were slinking from point to point. Chris's rifle spat a sudden jet of sparks and the running man dropped. They saw him raise himself to his knees and get back to the cover of the water-tank.

"Come on, dad. You first, then Look Chang."

Look Chang slipped a long carving-knife up his sleeve and stood waiting.

"I'll bring up the rear. I'm quicker than you two. Mind you, make no noise as you open the door."

Look Chang softly opened the door and passed out, a grey shape against the growing dawn. The coast was clear. So far, so good.

"I'll give 'em something to hold 'em a bit." Chris jerked his rifle to his face and sent five shots at the iron water-tank. He was sure Tyler was there and maybe Biggs. The metallic *phut* of the bullets on the iron sounded like a riveter, and two shots from the windmill answered him and a spurt of sparks burst from the stables. Before the flurry of fire died into silence he followed his father out into the dim greyness of the vine-filled flower-garden and headed for the edge of the arroyo.

If he ever prayed he did so during the passage of that

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE 77

path. The growing vines were a good cover but no protection, and in the unearthly silence that seemed portentous Chris seemed to hear his own heart beating. That garden was not more than a hundred feet long, but it seemed miles before he saw Look Chang throw himself on his face. The lithe Chinaman seemed to ooze under the wire strands of the gate, which was locked, and then turn to hold the wire up to let Sam pass under it. At that moment Lady Luck turned her face away.

Biggs, cursing his wounded hand behind that iron tank, dodged for new cover and found it behind a big tree in the very middle of the yard. From that tree he could see both faces of the house. Moving black dots along the line of the garden caught his eye. There is nothing more mercilessly betraying than the dawn light. He knew instinctively what those dots meant and gave a sudden shout of alarm.

"They've left by the side-door," he shouted. "Cut across the arroyo and head 'em off!"

A quick flurry of random shots raked the vines. Look Chang staggered a little but went on, and the next moment they slipped over the lip of the arroyo bank. Sliding, slipping, stumbling in the shaly slope they reached the bottom and headed north as fast as they could run. They must get well past that windmill to be safe.

Whoops and yells rang out. They knew suddenly that their escape had been discovered. Then a half-dozen heads appeared over the edge of the arroyo and a volley of shots crashed out. Look Chang went down in a heap. Sam stumbled over him and fell, tripping Chris who was close behind, who fell headlong. He was dimly conscious of a blow on his head. The pin-wheels seemed to explode inside his skull and a great blaze of light dazzled

him. Then came sudden blackness like a blanket shutting down over his face.

He never knew how long he lay there. The next thing he knew the sun was up and shining in his face. He raised his head, which seemed about to burst and fly into pieces. He got his hand up with difficulty, for it seemed weighted with lead, and felt gingerly at his head. His fingers felt caked blood, and with a suppressed groan he got to his knees and looked, first of all, at his father.

Sam lay where he had fallen and a grey pallor on his face like a painted mask told its own tale. With a little inarticulate cry Chris slipped an arm about his father's shoulders and drew him from the bottom of the arroyo, where his head lay lower than his feet, to the slope. Frenziedly tearing open shirt and waistcoat he sought for what he feared to find.

There it was! High up in the right breast a dark puncture showed like a burn. He could see that the bullet that entered there ranged down. Sam had been shot from above and the bullet must have raked the length of his body, diagonally through the lungs. Its mark lay in the little bubbles of red foam that oozed from the grey lips. Then the eyes blinked once or twice as old Sam tried to speak. Finally words came.

"They—got—me—son," he whispered brokenly. "Get out, son, before they get—you—too."

"The dogs! The damned dirty murderin' dogs!" Chris's voice broke suddenly on a high note. Useless curses and imprecations burst from his lips, words that were not profane at all but just the oral froth of futility. He was helpless in the clutch of circumstances and his murdered father was dying before his eyes. He made a sudden rush at the side of the arroyo but the bank gave

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE 79

way under his feet and he slid back and fell. Twice he rushed that bank before he won to the top and could look along the level towards the house.

No one was there! A grim and deathly silence overhung the place and the low thunder of departing hoofbeats told what had taken place.

Even Biggs and Tyler had not the nerve to do more than make sure of their ghoully work. They could not stay with their completed crime! They knew that eight men, accustomed to guns, could not shoot downhill at three men at a range of less than thirty feet and miss. They saw Look Chang go down in a heap. They saw old Sam fall in a dying rush and they saw Chris go down over him and they knew that their work was thoroughly done.

Never again would Sam Boden or Chris talk loosely about the Nighthawks. Neither of them would ever give testimony in any law court as to what they knew. Father and son were the only witnesses and now they were removed.

But neither Biggs nor any of his men had the nerve to do more than glance at their completed crime. Safety lay in getting as far from the scene of the murder as was possible, before it was discovered. They only stopped long enough to be very sure that they had left no betraying marks that could identify them. Then they left at a gallop—and the ghosts of the murdered men rode on their saddle-cantles as they headed for Drybone.

Only Morley broke the silence—Morley who had helped hold up the Atlantic Express train a year before and who immediately after that robbery bought a ten thousand-dollar ranch. A week before he had been unable to buy a saddle at the Golden Rod emporium.

"I reckon that'll about clear all scores fer all of us now, Biggs," he cackled grimly. "No free board for any of us from now on."

"Not one of us knows a damned thing," said Biggs. "And a horse bit me on the hand." He laid his wounded hand in his saddle pommel and swore as his horse jumped. "First thing, you men all clean your guns so there'll be no sign of any shootin'. Then scatter. No one of us has even seen the others. Swear to that. Scatter, I tell you, an' keep yore mouths shut."

He lifted his horse into a gallop and followed by his men headed down the hard-beaten trail.

Chris listened to the last of their volleying hoof-beats and saw the red dust cloud that overhung the Drybone trail. When that sound died away he slipped back into the arroyo, and as he leaned over his father he was suddenly aware of Look Chang. He was sitting up nursing a wounded arm and he grinned painfully.

"My go get water," he said heavily. Then he leaned over old Sam. "Damn bad job," he muttered, shaking his head. "My think him die."

"Don't even say it," Chris burst forth. "Get some water, Chang, and get it quick. They're all gone now."

"My can do."

Look Chang pulled himself to his feet with his good hand, scrambled up the bank and came back presently with a rusty tin can filled with water. Chris seized it and poured a few drops into his father's mouth.

"Son!" Sam raised a wavering hand. "Son! I'm goin' now. I'm goin' fast. You'll be all alone, son. You'll travel a lonely trail from now on."

"Oh, dad!"

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE 81

Chris choked. Surely God could not be so unfeeling as to let his father die like this at the hands of dogs and murderers. His father, who had loved square-play and justice! Who had never intentionally harmed any human being! It was all so unfair! So futile and foolish!

"Son—listen! When you were just a little kid your mother died. She's waitin' for me now, Chris! I'm goin' to see her an' square myself with her for things I've done. Listen now, son. An' you, too, Look Chang. Listen!"

What reserve force he drew on cannot be told, but it was there and it answered to his call. His voice was steady but faint and his breathing was laboured.

"They've got me, son! In twenty minutes, as men count time, I'll be dead. If you can do it, bury me by your mother. I lay by her for years. We'd both like it at the end. You know the place. An'—this is most important, boy—you're the son o' my body! My son mustn't be a killer! Get that? Her son can't be a criminal! It just ain't possible. I know how you feel about it. But you must promise me, son, that you'll leave here at once. Leave at once and for good. Don't even go to Drybone! I've lost the Lyin' Cross by my looseness in business. Biggs, damn him, 'll get the Lyin' Cross. You'll not have a dollar in the world, but just remember, son, that success is not measured by dollars. Money talks—but only to the dumb. Other means of speech are clear to those who are not idiots. Promise me that you'll leave here at once and start life in some other place."

"But, dad!"

"Son, I'm dying an' I've got to meet your mother

clean. Can I do that if I know that our only son is plannin' to be a murderer? Promise me that if you get away from here, you'll never pull a gun on any human bein'. Not even in self-defence!"

Undoubtedly Sam Boden was not in his right mind when he made that demand. He had lived his life on the ranges of the West and he knew the demands that the West makes. A man must be prepared to work out his own salvation. If it comes with gun and iron, so much the better. He must work it out himself. Sam Boden knew that the law of the ranges was that the quickest shot lived longest.

"Promise me," he said hoarsely, "you'll take another name and leave here. You can't stay, Chris. Promise me that you'll leave this damned place. That you'll never even *carry* a gun. You've got to promise me that, son! I can't go in peace and meet your mother an' maybe my God, too, knowin' I'm leavin' our soft plannin' to be a murderer and a killer. As God is your judge an' mine, too, son. Promise me."

"I—I promise you, dad."

A long ten minutes followed. They were heart-sickening periods, a time of futile prayers and hopeless hoping, of great dry, body-shaking sobs. Then Look Chang with a muttered prayer to his outland gods leaned over Chris's shaking shoulders and drew Sam Boden's hat across the dead face.

"My think a good man is with the gods," he said. "Bad job, Chlis."

He laid a quiet hand on the trembling arm as he stared unwinkingly at the boy.

Not for many years could Chris bear to think of the details of that day. He and Look Chang got a pick and

CHRIS THROWS HIS GUNS IN A GRAVE 83

shovel from the tool-house and dug a grave on the slope where his mother slept. He felt that his father could not rest in any other place. It was heart-breaking work and he toiled on in the hope that his tired body might take its toil off the aching brain.

When at last with Chang's aid he wrapped the body in a saddle-blanket and laid him for ever at rest by his wife whom he had loved so tenderly, Chris slowly walked over to the pit, unbuckled belt and holster and quietly dropped them into the open grave. Look Chang shot a question at him.

"I promised him, Look Chang. He made me promise him that I'll never carry a gun again. I made a promise to take another name and leave this land. We've lost the ranch, Look Chang. I've got no money to pay you with any longer. You and I'll have to break off now. I'll head south, I reckon. I promised him."

"Huh. A promise to a man of honour is as manacles of steel. How you kill this man Biggs if you no cally gun?"

"By God"—Chris's chin flung up—"I can't do it now, Chang. That's a cinch. They're too many for me right now. These Nighthawks control all here and there is my promise. I've got to do what I promised him. I'll do that, but I'll make myself another promise. I swear I'll get that man Biggs, gun or no gun. I'll get him when he least expects it. I'll kill him if I have to wait for twenty years."

Look Chang drew a breath of relief and his agate eyes swept Chris's face approvingly, but he said no word.

"I told him I'll leave here at once and take another name," said Chris again.

"All lite. My go, too. Dis place no good now boss-man gone. Have got ponies in corral."

There were ponies there, of course, and a pack-mule and plenty of supplies in the house—and a promise that bound like a steel cable. That night there passed out of the Lying Cross two men and a pack-mule, headed south.

CHAPTER VIII

LATIGO JONES TAKES UP THE TRAIL

CHRIS BODEN had flung belt and holster into his father's open grave at the Lying Cross. Latigo Jones, gunless, riding a pintado horse, led a loaded pack-mule out of the corral of the Lying Cross and, with Look Chang riding behind him on a ewe-necked bay, headed for the line of the distant foot-hills to the south. At a turn in the trail he turned to his follower.

"Chang," he said quietly, "I reckon we part trails here. I've got no money. I can't pay you fifty dollars a month. I haven't got a hundred dollars in the world."

"Huh!" Look Chang's agate eyes half closed. "S'pose mebbe you wait till Look Chang ask. Twen'-fi' year ago Look Chang come to boss-man. No quit now. Where we go?"

"God knows." The youngster laughed recklessly. "I only know, Chang, that I promised my father that I'll never carry a gun, that I'll take another name and leave this land. I've got to do that. But, Chang"—his lips set in a grim line that Look Chang did not miss—"I'm comin' back. I don't know how or when but—I'm comin' back. If the law don't kill Biggs, I will. I swear that before God. Even if I have to kill him with my bare hands. I'll get him."

"Good! You no tell boss-man you no kill Biggs?" asked Chang anxiously.

"No. All I said was that I'd take another name and

leave here, and I promised him that I'll never carry a gun. That's all, but God knows it's enough."

Look Chang drew a breath of great relief.

"That not bad," he said. "Gun no good. Make too much bobbery. Talk too loud. I show you some day. Where we go now, Chlis?"

"Latigo, you mean, Chang. Remember that. That's my new name."

"All lite. My *sabe*, Latigo. Latigo all same strap that holds the saddle. No got latigo no can ride. That good name. Number One name. Where we go?"

"South, I reckon. May as well head south. You *sabe* Texas, Chang?"

"Yah." Chang nodded his head like a Chinese mandarin. "My *sabe*. Long time ago, when me I'il boy, my come from Canton side, land in Acapulco. My cook soldier-man in Mexico long time 'fore I come here. Then my dlist into 'Texas. Sure my *sabe* Texas. 'Sabe Long Trail. Make dlive two times."

"What drive?"

"Cattle," quoth Look Chang. "My cook grub-wagon one time. My got good fien' in Texas."

"The devil you have! Whereabouts?"

"His name Look Long. All same family mine. Him my cousin. Come Canton-side same time I come. Him lib on Long Trail now. Make him gambler place in Texas on river."

"Huh. What river?"

"No *sabe* river. Name of place Scalp Rock."

"Huh! Well, we may as well start, Chang. Let's hit the trail."

He checked his horse on the ridge-top and cast a long, lingering glance over the place that was to know him no

more: the place his father had loved and lost. Then he put spurs to his pintado pony, and with Look Chang bobbing clumsily behind him and the jangling pack-mule trotting to keep up, he headed south for the blue line of the foot-hills. Chris Boden had left the ranges of the Lying Cross for ever.

It was a far cry till Latigo Jones cast up in Texas. Jobs were easy to get and they drifted on by easy stages south and east. A month here, a month there, an emergency job at a round-up, loading cattle at Beatrice, riding in a rodeo at Kansas City, always observing the advice that Polonius gave Laertes:

Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment.

Latigo Jones drifted farther and farther from the land where his father and mother slept on the long ridge above the Lying Cross.

Day after day Look Chang cared for him as for a child. The old, wrinkled-faced Chinaman had known Latigo as baby, as boy, and as budding man. He had known and loved old Sam Boden and his wife and he transferred that firm affection to the son. He knew well those fits of black depression that rode like a grim spectre on his favourite's saddle-cattle. He knew the killing pain that the boy felt, and he sensed the scornful glances that men cast from time to time at the holsterless belt, and he honoured Latigo for his grim-faced reticence, for the boy never condescended to explain.

South, east, west, and south again! All the trails became as open books to them. They knew the wide, open spaces of Lower Colorado. They burned and blistered across the waterless miles of the Llano Estacado. They picked up the fateful mirages of the alkali plains where

men and cattle, too, are lured to death by thirst by the sight of cool lakes that never existed. Their trails that first year of their wanderings crossed and recrossed:

The big Lazy Y ranch knew them well. The Scissors outfit talked long of the grim-faced boy who never laughed, who toted no gun, who was so uniformly courteous to all that even Hank Wesson, the foreman, could find no cause for complaint.

"He knows his business," quoth Hank. "He kin ride anything, that wears hair. He kin rope like a Mexican, and he kin keep his mouth shut."

There was also another quality, but Hank did not know it. When they had been barely a week from the Lying Cross they camped one Saturday night near Westervelt. Look Chang disappeared almost at once and was gone all day. He drifted into camp like a shadow, quietly thrust Latigo aside from the coffee-pot and the fire and thrust an oblong package into his hands.

"You take um, Latigo," he said, grinning. "You no got gun. Dis better as gun. Gun talk too much. Dis no talk. Look Chang show you."

The astonished Latigo opened the package and found under his astonished eyes two knives. They were not ordinary knives of commerce. These blades showed their origin. Look Chang, an adept at smithwork, had forged them in a Westervelt blacksmithy from two long, heavy horseshoer's rasps. The criss-cross lines still marked the backs of the blades. Look Chang took them for a second, hefted them and returned them to the astonished Latigo.

"You take um," he said gently. "You no got guns. Take these. My show you. Look."

In his best broken English, eked out by signs, he showed

the astounded youngster. He had carefully weighted those twin blades with sheet lead wrapped about the handles and hidden by the leather of the grip so that he could tell exactly what those knives would do. There was no guesswork in Look Chang's craftsmanship. Thrown at a target twelve feet away, those blades, glancing point-first from the palm of the hand, went straight to the mark and slipped into it as easily as a hot needle slips into butter. At twenty-four feet they turned over once. At thirty-six they turned twice.

"My show you," said Look Chang. And he did.

Those two knives, carried one under each armpit, gave Latigo a new sense of security. Pistol practice even by one's own camp-fire calls for explanation sometimes and always for cash. With these blades it was different. And his promise kept him from a gun. So he set about the practice with those knives that later was to make him known from Tehuantepec to Saskatchewan.

Anything was a target. A tuft of weed behind the camp-fire as they lolled in their blankets while their hobbled horses tore at the tough grass, a twig, a dark spot of earth—almost anything made a suitable target. There was but one estimate to be made. Distance! If he estimated his distance correctly, those blades went as truly as he pointed his finger at an object as any bullet could have gone.

It took time and patience, but he had much of each, till finally even Look Chang, who would rarely be satisfied, gave reluctant admiration when he saw the results. A quick move of either hand and it came back shoulder high, palm up, with a ten-inch blade flat in it. It was like a poem to note what followed.

If he were in deadly earnest, those blades slid out

point-first. They slipped noiselessly into the target and stood quivering as though with furious rage, sunk to the hilts perhaps. If he did not have serious intent, the blades would sometimes turn in air and butt-first would smash the loaded handle against the target with all the felling force of a sledge-hammer blow. Or—Look Chang taught him this last with difficulty; it was a trick that he had learned in Sonora, the home of masters of the knife—he could make the singing blade turn half-way round when it had left his hand so that it would smash sideways against its mark.

“More better as gun,” said Look Chang solemnly as he handed a blade back after a long examination. “Now I feel good. Some day now you pay off for boss-man. These better as guns, huh?”

The converted Latigo Jones nodded.

“They do their work more quietly,” he conceded. “Let’s hit south again, Chang. We’ll trail south across the Texas Line and into the western part where the big ranches still are.”

If men were ever footloose those two were. Outlying camps welcomed them and passed them regretfully on, for good hands were rare. Wandering chuck-wagons on round-up gave them grub and godspeed, and always their horses’ heads pointed south.

“That must be the old Big Trail,” said Latigo. He checked his horse and pointed towards a dusty ribbon that swept from horizon to horizon. “That looks like a house over there, too. That’s queer.”

He pointed to a dusty fleck on the plain. It was miles away, but they headed up for it, and as they drew closer they saw that it was more than just a house. Beyond the brown spot a low line of trees rose slowly into view as

they rode, and a little later their horses' ears pricked forward as their questing nostrils told them of the water smell.

"There must be a river beyond the house," quoth Latigo. "That isn't just one house, Chang! It's a settlement."

A long cabin built of split cottonwood logs with two dug-outs and a corral behind it nested on the flat plain, and as they drew closer they saw that the houses almost perched on the river-bank. Suddenly a dog ran out and barked; then the door of the big house slapped open and a man stood staring at them from under the shadow of his hand.

Latigo stared back. It was too far away to distinguish any features, but his eyes took in the shapeless black trousers, the flat cap and the long brown overshirt that shone like wet silk in the light, and suddenly Look Chang gave a great shout.

"Look Long," he shrilled in a high treble. "Ohe! Look Long!"

He spurred his horse suddenly forward and seemed to fall out of the saddle, and the two men ran at each other as a sudden outburst of raucous Cantonese speech broke the rush. The next moment the grim-faced old Look Chang seemed to be swallowed up in an embrace that threatened to strangle him. When quiet came again Chang turned to Latigo.

"Him Look Long my cousin," he said. "Him tell me been here four-fi' years. Make much money here. Goo' place, too. This place call' Scalp Rock Crossin'!"

Latigo gazed about him interestedly. From time to time as they drifted south and west he had heard men speak of the Scalp Rock Crossing of the Rio Nita, where

the big northern-bound herds crossed the red flood. That river, fed from the higher ranges, was a torrent from March till August. Running between high banks for most of its course through the grass country it was almost a barrier to passing herds. Scalp Rock was the only point for miles where a herd could swim a passage.

In the very middle of the red stream lay a tiny island of solid rock. Rumour said that years before that island had been a tall pinnacle of rock that divided the mud-mass into two torrents, but years of weather and storm succeeding storm had worn it down. Lightning had struck it seven times, men said, and each stroke had scaled down the rock till the once-tall pinnacle was now no more than a good-sized flat stone in the very middle of the turbulent stream.

But the name stuck. Piece by piece Latigo got the story from Look Long.

He learned how Look Long, with his cousin Look Chang, had landed years before in Acapulco; how they drifted north across the Line to separate in an eager quest for money that was to take them home to Canton with new coffins. Latigo knew what Chang's luck had been, and now Look Long gave his own Odyssey.

With another boy, Chin Lee, to help him, he had built this store. Yes, this was the biggest river-crossing for two hundred miles. All the herds crossed here, where they were sure of water and grass and amole bed-grounds. Yes, he had made money. Why not? He traded salt and canned goods and tobacco for sore-footed cattle and for calves born on the bed-grounds that could not trail with the passing herds.

Also he kept liquor for those who wanted it, and the outfits of the passing herds liked to spend their money at

his always open gambling-tables. His roulette-table was big and clean and his bar was ample. Look Long grinned assent to a remark from Chang, got out a brass-wire-wrapped pipe, and Latigo, after one look at them, left them to talk and headed for the corral with the horses.

A quick exclamation from Chin Lee, Look Long's long-suffering assistant who rode along to help, stopped him, and his gaze followed Chin Lee's pointing finger as three men rode over the edge of the river-bank and headed for the store.

Latigo looked again. The flat across the river was empty. No herd was in transit. Where could these men have come from? He stepped back behind the house, quickly drove his pack-mule into an empty dug-out and watched. In the last two years he had learned that a man in hiding till the proper time comes has a great advantage.

The men rode up to the store and stopped quickly, their heads close together. At a quick hail from one of them the door of the big store opened and Look Long stood in the entrance rubbing his hands and talking volubly.

The new arrivals lost no time. Two of them flung out of saddle, tossed their reins to the third, and with a threatening rush gathered Look Long into a quick embrace and rushed him back inside the house. From his vantage point in the out-house Latigo saw this; then he heard a sudden shriek and yell. Then a shot and silence.

He quietly opened the door of the place, opened the back door of the store and slipped inside. The room was a little store-room where Look Long kept odds and ends of five years' trading: rolls of stinking hides were mixed with rolls of wire fencing, coils of new manila rope, letting kegs of horseshoe nails and boxes of shoes. . Seeing

glance through a crack in the wall chinking gave Latigo a clear view of the main room.

Look Chang lay half across the end of the table and behind him a bow-legged, red-bearded ruffian, his pistol hand half raised, dominated the room. Even then Latigo noticed that the man's lips were abnormally red and that his mouth was loose. The other, a tall, awkward, keen-faced man, had Look Long by the throat against the far wall.

"We know what you got," he said, shaking the quivering Look Long. "You been pickin' the passin' outfits fer five years now. I know what you do. I know who won the six thousand cash from the Pig Pen outfit last year. You'll come across now, Chink, or you'll lose your hide. Which is it? Comin' across?"

He drew a knife from his belt and pricked Look Long's neck just above the shirt collar. The Chinaman shrank back against the wall. The door of the store-room slammed suddenly open.

The red-faced man went down under a vicious blow from a pick-handle and his gun clattered to the floor. No man's eyes were quick enough to see the rest of it, to catch the sudden movement of Latigo's left hand. It flicked to his right arm-pit, then up and back. There was a dull glitter of passing metal and the tall man staggered against the wall with a shriek of pain.

th. "Never mind him, Chin Lee. He don't count. He's Yesafe enough."

Latigo came forward lightly. His lips were smiling, calves there was no mirth in that smile nor in the eyes, the pass. all true mirth begins. He stepped to the man

Also he by his knife and examined him carefully. The outfits of the blade had gone through the man's shoulder

as an awl goes through paper and had pinned him to the cottonwood logs. Latigo smacked the pommel of the knife with the palm of his hand and the man shrieked in agony.

"You'll stay put," quoth Latigo grimly. "Try to pull that out before I tell you and I'll put another blade through your other hand. Now listen!" He jerked Redhead to his feet and lined him up against the wall by his other victim. "You damned scoundrels have got only a taste of what you ought to get. If I were like you, by God, I'd kill you both. But I'm not takin' your horses. But you'll leave your guns for a keepsake and if you ever come back here you'll find 'em waitin'. Beat it! If I catch you again I'll scalp you like an Indian clear down to the ears."

With a quick jerk he pulled the heavy knife from the wall. The man shrieked in pain but staggered to the door, and he, with his dazed companion, got to their horses and climbed stiffly into saddle. The mounted man, beyond one great gulp and oath of astonishment, gave no sign as his companions mounted. When they clattered down the trail at a gallop and plunged over the edge of the river-crossing in a frenzied rush Latigo strode back into the big room. For a brief moment he stood frozen into silence at what he saw.

Look Long and Chin Lee were bending over Look Chang. His head lay on his arms on the table and a deathly pallor, that grew even as Latigo leapt across the room, passed over his face.

"My God, Chang! Not you! They haven't got you, Chang!"

But even as he denied it he knew they had. He impotently cursed himself for his carelessness in letting those men escape before he had seen to Chang. Seeing

him at the table, he had simply assumed that he was unhurt and now—his heart seemed to stand still at this. It was the last stroke that Fate could deal him. This road he was travelling was a bitter road indeed. First his father had been taken and now old Look Chang, the best friend a youngster ever had.

His mind went back with the speed of a camera. It clicked on desert camps, on pay-days, on round-ups, on desolate jobs that would have been even more desolate but for the loyal old Chinaman whose love for him passed the love of woman.

"Not you, Chang! Don't tell me you're badly hurt."

Chang grinned up at him, but that grin was merely a gesture. The shot fired mostly at random by the stranger had found its mark and done its work, and the old Chinaman knew it. He seized Latigo by both hands.

"My go plitty soon," he said brokenly. "Some day you be Chlis Boden again, huh?"

"I—my God, I hope so, Chang."

His eyes filled with tears. For more than two years he and Look Chang had wandered footloose over the ranges. For more than two years they had shared good and evil fortune, and Latigo had discovered that being an alien was no bar to a strong and deep love for the man. Look Chang was the last link that bound him to a past he sometimes felt could never have existed, and now a thief's bullet had snapped that link.

Look Chang felt that look. Latigo's eyes and smiled a little. Then he suddenly passed into semi-consciousness as Look Long bent over him. He spoke in a broken jargon that Look Long made no attempt to translate and that Latigo did not understand. If he could have had translated it, it would have run about like this:

"The Bitter Road is very long and sometimes the Way is dark. But there are lights, too. And those who travel it find that if they keep the Faith it brings them at last to quiet pastures by running streams. But it *is* the Bitter Road and even those we love best must travel it. The gods send we travel it not alone. Look Long!" Two claw-like hands settled on his friend's wrists. "Look Long!"

"Yah." Look Long bent again over the limp figure of his friend.

"You *sabe*, Latigo. My work long time his father. Him good man."

He broke into an indistinguishable jargon that Latigo understood not at all, and through it all old Look Long nodded from time to time. Then came coma again. And when Latigo came forward again it was to see Chin Lee lighting a joss stick that fizzed and smoked, and burning a handful of red and gilt papers that went up in a black cloud, through which Look Chang, stiff and stark upon the table, looked almost regal.

All that night Latigo sat by his dead friend, and those hours of loneliness hardened his very soul into a sheath of steel. He helped Look Long dig a grave and he helped Chin Lee pile some saffron-tinted rice on it and burn the Seven Way candles. When it was done he got his horses and the pack-mule from the corral and saddled up while Look Long and Chin Lee stood regarding him.

"Where you go, huh?" demanded the old Chinese. "Mobbee so you come back someday?"

"God knows. I don't know, Look Long. I wish you luck. You and Chin Lee, too."

"Yah. That all lite. Where you go? Huh? What road?"

"God knows Who knows all things. The Bitter Road I guess. I'm gettin' to know it pretty well, Look Long."

"Yah. That so. Even the Bitter Road has a good end; Goo'bye, Latigo." He broke into the vernacular: "Never delay a parting. The gods may have good things in store that will spoil by keeping."

He stood with Chin Lee and waved a yellow hand to Latigo as he passed over the Western Divide and headed into the very eye of the setting sun.

The Bitter Road was claiming him again and was to hold him for another two-year term.

CHAPTER IX

THE MILLION DOLLAR PLOT

"THERE's only one thing for you to do, you fool. Jump your bail. As an officer of the court I can't advise you, but if I were in your shoes I'd do it in a minute."

John Lucas stared Simon Biggs out of countenance in his office in Drybone. Biggs, huge, hairy, used to having his own way, demurred.

"I got too much to lose," he objected.

"You damned fool. Fioldin' up a stage like you and Tyler did is a hangin' matter in this State. Don't mistake that. Your neck's at stake if you come to trial, and you will. I can't stave it off any longer. If they try you, just as sure as shootin' somebody will connect you with the Boden shooting. Somebody always weakens and turns State's evidence. You know that."

"But the Lyin' Cross!" objected Biggs. "If I leave here and jump my bail I can't come back. I'll lose all I've got. I bought the Lyin' Cross in after old Boden was killed, an' it's a gold mine."

"I'll buy it from you," said Lucas curtly. "Now about the Boden——"

Biggs looked to door and windows before he spoke, and then did so gradually.

"It's damned funny," he said heavily. "All three of 'em were shot. There's no doubt about that. Hell, man! Eight men couldn't pot-shot three men from above at a range of less'n thirty feet and miss. Tyler says he saw all

three of 'em go down. Of course we didn't stay to take a look. That wasn't sense. Suppose one of 'em had been only wounded and recognized us. No, sir. We got all of 'em all right. Later when the shootin' was discovered two of the bodies was gone."

"Who buried old Sam Boden?" demanded Lucas.

"Nobody knows. Some friend o' his'n, most likely, who never would admit it."

"Well, what became of the other two?"

"How do I know? What I do know is this. If young Boden had got away he'd have come right back here to use his knowledge against me."

"That's so." Lucas was plainly puzzled. "The very fact that the bodies were gone was what saved your neck, my friend. If those bodies are ever found, they'll hang you as high as Haman. It's my guess that you and your bunch lost your nerve. That you didn't hurt Chris Boden much. That they pulled their freight and were afraid to come back."

Biggs poured a stiff drink from a decanter, but Lucas stopped him midway.

"I did my best for you," he said. "When you and Tyler were indicted by the Grand Jury I got the case adjourned and adjourned and so did the County Attorney. He wanted to wait till he could get Chris Boden's testimony. That would have hanged you. It's a good thing for you that this Chris Boden was either killed or dropped out of sight. There's no reason for him ever to come back. He's lost Lyin' Cross even if he were alive. But we can't get another postponement. If you're here when court meets you'll have to stand your trial, and I can't pull you out."

Sim Biggs scowled.

"I can sell it at any minute to Jason."

"Do it!" said Lucas forcefully. "They've got too much against you, Biggs. The painted horse. The stage hold-up. The robbery of the cash from Ellis. They'll drag it all out, I tell you. Do as you choose, though. You're playin' with your own neck, not mine."

Biggs rose and stamped up and down the room. His face was a study. Years of crooked work in Drybone had brought him a fortune—if he could realize it quickly.

"Where will you go?" asked Lucas.

"Me? Hell, man, I know the very place to go. A place they'll never think of lookin' for me. It's a place in Northern Texas where the herds from the outlyin' ranches cross the Rio Nita on the way north. It's a place called Scalp Rock. There's nothin' there, but a man with a little money kin make a fortune."

"Don't sound much. Explain."

"It's the only river-crossin' fer miles. A couple of stores with bars, and dance-halls, and a gamblin'-place like the Blue Front, and maybe a ferry to charge so much per head for ferryin' the herds across. By God, that's the game! I'll do that very thing and hold up the passin' herds. The only crossin' is at Scalp Rock. If I locate a homestead there to cover the ferry I kin charge what I choose. What the devil's the matter in the street?"

A sudden babble of shrill voices broke the afternoon hush as every store and saloon along Drybone's main street vomited forth its denizens. Lucas jerked the office door open and hurled a query at a passing man. The answer came back curt and profane.

"Number Five west-bound ran into an open switch," said the man. "Two Pullmans ditched. A man was killed, they say."

A running man thrust the speaker aside:

"Hey, Mr Lucas!" he hailed. "You're wanted at Doc Barrett's. Doc told me to git you right away. A man's dyin' there an' wants to make a will."

Biggs settled himself at the table with the decanter while Lucas snatched hat and papers and hurried down the street to directions proffered by a dozen men.

"Doc wants you inside, Mr Lucas."

He thrust the crowd aside and forced his way inside to the inner office where 'Doc' Barrett, red-faced but unexcited, leaned over a man stretched out upon a long table.

"Here he is now. All right, Lucas. You're just in time, I reckon. This man's mortally hurt. He's conscious, but he can't talk much. He asked for a lawyer to make his will."

"Let me see him." Lucas bent over the injured man.

He was a big, burly man, grey-bearded and brown-faced. His face was lined and seamed with deep wrinkles that are the marks of desert winds, and his gnarled hands were warped and twisted as though by years of rheumatic pains. He tossed a little and groaned heavily as Doctor Barrett leaned across him.

"I got a lawyer for you, as you said," he said gently. "Can you talk to him?"

The heavy chest rose and fell tempestuously as the man strove for speech, but the effort failed. Again the doctor spoke.

"If you want to fix up your affairs you've got to shake yourself together," he said gently.

"You're a liar," said the man suddenly.

Doctor Barrett almost jumped and Lucas laughed. The voice of the injured man droned on, gaining power with

each uttered word. Lucas snatched a pen from his pocket, took some paper from the table and waited.

• "You a lawyer, hey? All right! Damned funny, ain't it, Doc, how we need so many people comin' an' goin' from this here world? We got to have two women—a mother an' a midwife—to bring us into it. We need all the world to live in while we're here and by James we need a lawyer an' a doctor, an' some says a priest, to help us get out of it. Looks like we can't do nothin' alone. Yeh, I've always thought I could do a one-man job. But there's only one thing a kid can do alone. He kin cut his own teeth an' that's all. Everything else some one's got to do fer him. Don't take that down. Get this. This is the last will an' testament of me, Wesley Duke, County o' Bolivar, State o' Texas. I'm sane an' in my right mind. An' I want a drink."

Dr Barrett hastily poured some brandy into a tooth-mug and leaned over the patient. He coughed over the raw spirits.

"You know Sam Boden?" he asked curtly.

"Yes." Lucas started visibly. What was coming now?

"Where is Sam? Lives here, don't he, with his son, Chris?"

"He did live here till two years ago," said Lucas. "But he and his son don't live here now."

He shook a warning hand at Dr Barrett, who strove for speech but finally desisted.

"Huh! That's bad. Old Sam and me was partners years ago. His wife was my sister. I never saw the boy Chris. I got a letter. God knows how long ago. About a month, I reckon. Sam Boden wrote it from his place in Drybone about two years ago. It followed me but never quite caught up with me till a month or so ago.

Alaska—Oklahoma—Texas—in the oil game—God, He knows where I was. All I know is I had a hell of a good time wherever I was.

“Old Sam told me he was in some trouble and needed some money, so I came on to see. What I’ve got is what Sam kin have. And now Sam ain’t here, an’ I’m dyin’, they tell me. If I’d stuck to a saddle an’ a cayuse I’d be all right. Them damned railroads only bring trouble to people. I made my pile in Texas an’ I more’n doubled it in Alaska and I aimed to find old Sam, an’ now I’m cashin’ in ’cause I rode in a Pullman car. That’s luck, d’ye see?”

“Get this down. I’ve advertised for Sam. I’ve put notices in a dozen papers. I told him an’ Chris to head for Velarde in Texas. To go to the Crutch J. That’s my home ranch. See? Old Tonkaway Kane’s my partner there. I wanted to find old Sam and if Sam’s dead I want his son Chris. That’s what I’ve come here for. That’s why I’ve paid three hundred dollars in newspapers to find ’em. I’ll provide for both of ’em. Take this down.

“All property I own listed as follows”—came a list of property that Lucas got down with difficulty—“goes to my old friend Sam Boden for his life. In case of his death it goes to his son, Chris Boden. My big Texas ranch, the Crutch J, with all its stock and holdins’, goes to Christopher Boden an’ Doris Kane, daughter of my partner, Tonkaway Kane, provided they marry. Get that straight. If, after knowin’ each other, they don’t want to marry then one-fourth of the Crutch J goes to Chris Boden and the balance goes to the Old Soldiers’ Home in Kansas. Got that down?”

“Yes. Does this man Kane know Chris Boden?”

“No. He’s never seen him. Find Chris Boden and

send him down to Tonkaway. That's all then. Mind you advertise again for Chris. I been doin' it for a year past an' couldn't find him. That's why I came on here. Thought I might strike a trail. But it's no use. If Chris is dead, the whole thing goes to the Soldiers' Home. God knows that's short an' simple. Get it down and let me sign it. I got a job o' dyin' to 'tend to. What ails you now?"

"As you say, Boden may be dead"—Lucas peered at him.

"Get my wallet an' get your pay out o' that. Suppose he is dead. Kin I help it? That's his business. If he's dead, I'll know it soon. If he ain't dead he soon will be. Anyway most men'd come back from hell for a million dollars. That's what I'm leavin'. All right! I'll sign here. Now both of you! Two witnesses. There she is! Now listen.

"Send a copy o' this will to my partner Tonkaway Kane in Velarde, Texas. Send it to Peter Hewitt, his lawyer there an'—advertise for Sam an' Chris—— Gi' me another drink, Doc. There may not be free drinks where I'm goin'. If the preachers 're right—which they're not—I've drunk a slew o' sulphur water in my time. The Picketwire was all sulphur. I kin smell it now. It wasn't 'Picketwire' at all. The old Frenchies called it La Purgatoire 'count o' the sulphur, and our waddies changed the name. That's how come."

His voice grew weaker and weaker and droned off into broken words. Suddenly he raised himself on both hands, his eyes, like the hooded eyes of a dying old eagle, stared out into the red-hot street of Drybone and his voice cracked with the intensity of his emotion.

"My God," he said suddenly, and his wavering finger

traced a line in the air. "Look! Was there ever such a land? Land an' grass an' water for the cattle on a thousand hills. No fences. All open ranges. Lush grass shoulder-high for the beddin'. An' that's heaven for a trail-weary herd. Look at it, Doc."

Doctor Barrett looked—once. Then he drew a towel across the lined face and John Lucas rose tempestuously.

"You look after his burial, Doc," he said. "I'll attend to the will and to gettin' out the advertisements for Boden. Young Boden. In case he wasn't killed in that wretched affair here."

John Lucas nearly ran back to his office, where he found Biggs still sitting, drinking steadily.

"Come out of it, you rum-soaked hound." Lucas smote him on the shoulders. "I've just seen a better man than either of us cash in," he said. "Listen, Biggs! Do you want a third part of a million dollars! It's ours for the takin'. All we have to do is to pick it up."

Biggs leered uncertainly at him across the table, and Lucas went on. The country-town lawyer who never saw more than a hundred dollars in a fee, who thought that month lucky when his income exceeded his bar and board bills, was not proof to the sudden temptation. Wes Duke, millionaire by his own account, had died most opportunely. It could all be done so easily and none would ever be the wiser. In brief, curt, incisive sentences that cut their way into Biggs's whisky-fogged brain he made all clear.

"He's made his will. I'm to send it to one Peter Hewitt at Velarde, Texas, for his partner, one Tonkaway Kane. He wanted to find this Chris Boden. This young Boden inherits all Duke left and half a big ranch if he marries Doris Kane, the daughter of Duke's partner. Anyhow,

Chris Boden gets all that Duke left even if he does not get his share of the ranch. See?"

- "Damned if I do. Chris Boden is either dead or alive. If he's dead it don't help us none. If he's alive—I don't see what you're drivin' at, Lucas. You're crazy."

"You fool!" Lucas leaned forward intently. "This man Duke never saw Chris Boden. Neither has Hewitt nor Kane ever seen him, and Chris Boden was either killed when his father was shot or else he just naturally dropped out o' sight. Who's goin' to find him? Not you or me. I'm goin' to send this will to Hewitt and I'll write him that Chris Boden can come down to him when he wants him. I know where he is."

"The hell you do." Biggs stared at him over his glass.

"He's my nephew Len Silas over in Exton," said Lucas. "He's about the size and colour and age of this Chris Boden. He's a good ranch-hand, so he can play the game, and we can count on him. My idea is to send him south to this Velarde to try to get work with this man Kane. He'll go as Chris Boden, of course. We'll tie him up so he can't double-cross us. He'll go to hell for a pile o' money. All he'll have to do is to stay there long enough to establish his identity as Chris Boden. Then he can collect on the securities and come back. If he chooses to try to marry the girl, that's his look-out."

"He'll double-cross us as sure as shootin'."

"He won't dare. He'll know that if we squeal on him, he'll go to jail. We'll have the whip-hand on him. Once he gets the securities, we'll sell 'em for cash and pull our freight. What say, Biggs?"

"Sure!" Biggs rose stormily. "I got to leave here anyhow. I'm goin' to head as far south as I can. I want to be close to the Mexican line in case I have to jump

across. I know the very place. I'll take what cash I can raise and pull out. I'm goin' to head for the place, Scalp Rock, that I told you of. Put your nephew wise so if he needs to be kin git in touch with me. He'll find me there. Scalp Rock, mind you. It's at the crossin' of the Rio Nita. All the old-timers know it. I was there twenty years ago."

He lurched to his feet, seized his hat and belt and was out of the door while John Lucas stared after him.

CHAPTER X

CHRIS BODEN MEETS LATIGO JONES

"MARRY a man I've never even heard of?" Doris Kane drew herself up indignantly and looked at her father, who grinned at her tolerantly. "Do you mean what you say, dad?"

"That's right, honey. Go off half-cocked like you always do. All I said was that Peter Hewitt got a letter from a lawyer named Lucas up in Montana. He said that my partner Wes Duke died up there at Drybone and that by his will he left his pile and a part of the Crutch J ranch to his nephew Chris Boden, but——"

"But what?" Doris's pretty chin went up. Her grey eyes dilated a little and her pretty mouth hardened.

"Only one-fourth of the Crutch J goes to young Boden unless the said Chris Boden marries Doris Kane—that's sure you, honey—in which case him and his wife are to be joint owners of the Crutch J. It's worth a lot of money, sweetness, and money ain't easy to git to-day. Of course old Wes left a lot of other stuff. All of it goes to this nephew Chris Boden, like I said. The Crutch J is the only thing to be divided."

"Suppose I do not marry this—Chris Boden. Ugh, what a name!"

Her chin went up in high disdain—a sign that her father well knew.

"Then the nephew gits his one-fourth share and the rest of it goes to the Old Soldiers' Home in Kansas. If

you want to own the Crutch J, honey, you got to marry this here Chris Boden."

"Do you think I'd do that? Do you, daddy?"

Something in her voice set fire to him.

"You wouldn't be your mother's daughter if you would," he said curtly. "Yet—you might take a look at him. It won't hurt none to do that. It's an easy thing to do."

"Huh. Wes Duke died up in Butte, Montana. His nephew must be up there, too. How can I see a man up there from here? I tell you I shall hate the man on sight!"

"Uh-huh! I reckon that's God's truth." Tonkaway's grin broadened. "You're just like that yaller mule that Baldy Stone drives to the chuck-wagon. He has to back her in to the breechin' when he aims to move her forward. It just happens, honey, that this here Chris Boden wrote me a letter and asked for a job on the Crutch J or the Lazy M. Seems he's been top-hand on the northern ranch and he wants to look the Lazy M over an' the Crutch J before he decides to spread his blankets in our bunk-house. I wrote him that I had a job for him and he's due here any time now."

"What kind of a job have you got for him?"

"Good Lord, honey! What kind of a job! You know how bad I need men. You must have forgot that we're drivin' twelve thousand head of stock north—north, mind you, and not a man with our outfits has ever been along the trail. All we know of it is tales the old-timers tell of the Chisholm Trail that are mostly lies, I reckon. I wrote that lawyer John Lucas in Butte and I told him if Chris Boden, the nephew of Wes Duke, knew the northern trail to send him down here sky-hootin'; that I kin use

CHRIS BODEN MEETS LATIGO JONES 111

him as trail-boss. I told him I'm drivin' twelve thousand steers an' cows an' that I need a man who knows the country,"

"Dad, you didn't write him that?" Doris well knew the trouble that might be caused by having an outsider take hold as trail-boss.

"Sure I did. If this Chris Boden can handle twelve thousand head of stock, if he can handle twenty-three strange men, and take the herd six hundred miles along a new trail, he's a good man and don't you fergit it. Too good to be a mere top-hand on a northern ranch in a snow country. I'm goin' to try him out, honey, an' while he's here you might take a look at him. I bet you won't like him a l'il bit."

"You win. I'll hate him on sight." Doris rose, snapped her quirt at a greyhound and snatched at her pony's head. "How long before you'll be ready to start north?" she asked.

"You know how it is, honey. We got a pooled herd of twelve thousand. We'll drive 'em north and fatten 'em on the alfalfa country and then keep on to a market. We ought to be off in three weeks—if that new trail-boss turns up. We can't move till we git a man who knows that northern trail. If you're goin' for a ride, keep away from Red Cañon. They're combin' the back ranges up that way and if the cattle are wild you might have trouble."

Doris said nothing. She pulled her horse to her, swung into saddle and departed in a cloud of dust. Old Torkaway stared after her and his face broke into a mass of wrinkles.

"She's as like her mother as two peas," he growled. "An' she can't beat that. Doggoned if I know how to make her like this Chris Boden, though. But any nephew

of old Wes that he thought enough of to leave him a share of the Crutch J must be worth lookin' at. Wes wouldn't have left his money to a wastrel."

For an hour he sat and thought, mostly of his old partner. For years the two great ranches—the Lazy M of Tonkaway Kane's and the Crutch J that Wes Duke owned—had been run almost as a giant corporation. Then old Wes had gone to Montana and had left the Crutch J to be managed and administered by Tonkaway. And the end had justified him, for old Tonkaway had handled his partner's ranch better than he did his own. And now old Wes was gone. His heart missed a beat as he realized that he would never again hear the voice that had rung in his ears on round-up and in the old days in the last of the Indian fights. He sat up at a thought.

That was a curious will that old Wes had made! He had left one-quarter of the Crutch J to his nephew Chris Boden, but if he and Doris married they were to have the ranch on equal shares. Old Wes must have been pretty sure of his nephew to make a will like that. Chris Boden must be a man of sorts. He and old Wes had always seen eye to eye and had always liked the same kinds of men and they both knew men. He rose and shut his clasp-knife with a snap.

"I reckon I can trust old Wes's judgment," he muttered. Then his eye caught sight of a red dust-devil in the jaws of Red Cañon. "Doggone that girl," he growled. "She's headed right for Red Cañon just 'cause I told her not to go there. With the boys driving two herds down the cañon there may be hell to pay."

He was only half right. Red Cañon opened up from the Crutch J like a cut in a cake. The sides of that cut ran up sheer and converged to the saddle. The cañon

CHRIS BODEN MEETS LATIGO JONES 113

was a half mile wide at the mouth and narrowed to nothing at the crest of the range. It was a true box cañon. There was no reason why Doris should ride up Red Cañon except the very human one that her father had told her not to. But things were happening in Red Cañon.

At the sharp upper end where the hills began a man rode out of the sunset and checked his roan pony on the edge of the saddle. To right and left the piñon-covered hills swept up to a jagged skyline and at his feet Red Cañon opened its sheer walls above a boulder-filled valley that was studded with live-oaks. At the sharp clink of iron on rock he turned in his saddle. His lean face thrust forward and his grey eyes that held a curious dancing light fixed on the madrone scrub.

"Looks like this country is sure gettin' crowded," he muttered. "Sounds like company's comin' in by the back door."

He quieted his pony with a light touch on the neck as a big grey horse blundered along the trail. At sight of the lithe figure on the roan pony the newcomer checked and hailed.

"Mornin'," he said cheerfully. "Can you tell me if I'm on the right road to the Crutch J ranch?"

The man addressed glanced again at his questioner. His quick eyes took in the trail-tired horse; the open stirrups that marked the man as a northern man where tapideros, that guard the feet from the tearing mesquite and the chaparral, are unknown; he noted the single-cinch, 'centre-fire' saddle and the new manila rope on it, and he grinned affably.

"Holin' in for the Crutch J, are you?" he asked casually.

"Yep." The man on the grey horse grinned, too.

"Looks like I'm lost at that, My name's Boden—Chris Boden."

"Oh—Boden, you say?" The man on the roan looked at him critically. "I don't think I ever saw you before," he said thoughtfully.

"Likely not. I'm a stranger here, but old man Kane'll be lookin' for me. I'm headin' for the Crutch J to land a job with Kane. I'm the new trail-boss of the Crutch J ranch, if I'm told the truth. You live here?"

"Lord, man, but you ask a lot of questions. No, I don't live here. I'm just a drifter lookin' for a job, you might say. I'm headin' for any old ranch that needs men. My name's Jones. Some damned fool pinned Latigo to it for a feeler and I let it go at that. You say you're the new trail-boss of the Crutch J?"

"So I've been led to believe." Boden laughed lightly. "It's a darned funny kind of a mess. I was top-hand of a ranch up in Montana when my uncle Wes Duke died. He owned this Crutch J ranch down here and his old friend Tonkaway Kane has been runnin' it for him. It seems the old man left me a quarter interest in the Crutch J. Tonkaway Kane wrote me a letter through a lawyer askin' did I know the northern trail. Me? Do I know it? I'll tell the world I know it. And he said if I knew my business about cattle and if I knew the trail to come on down and drive his herd north for 'em. Says he wants hands."

"That's good," said Latigo Jones. "I'm wantin' a job, too. Maybe we can connect."

Boden looked him over critically. He noted the lean brown face, the dancing grey eyes that shone with pure deviltry, and the lithe, muscular figure. Then he noted the roan pony and the worn but perfect outfit.

"Looks like you spread a good rope yourself," he said grudgingly. "Where'er you from, Jones?"

"*Alli! Alla!* Here and there." Jones spread his hands abroad and snapped his fingers. "I've trailed north and south and east and west, but I like it best here. Reckon I can land a job with that Crutch J outfit you spoke of?"

"I don't see why you can't if they need hands, and I understand they do. Let's get down the cañon."

"Look there, will you!" Latigo suddenly straightened up in his saddle and picked up his reins. "There's a bunch of cattle shootin' down that draw!"

A lowing, thundering bunch of brown backs surged down a cut across the valley and red dust rose like a cloud.

"They're combin' the ranges for stock. Looks like the last of the round-up. Come on, man! This is no place to be caught. God, man! Look at 'em!"

From the north, east and west flanks of Red Cañon the cattle came down in a sudden flood. Fire-eyed bulls and fighting cows, shouldering and bawling, catapulted down the steep slopes like toboggans in a chute and they fought and struggled for place.

"Five hundred head at least," commented Jones. "Good-lookin' stuff, too. Let's get down."

He picked up his lazy pony with heel and rein and followed by Boden on the big grey stallion he headed down the slope.

"Look there!" Boden's voice, like the shriek of a siren, made his leader jump. "Stop, man! For God's sake, man, stop and look!"

What he meant was plain. A second herd was coming down into Red Cañon from the other side and the two herds would meet head on below them. Both men knew

what that collision would mean. Latigo Jones checked his horse as the heads of the running herds met with a crash like thunder and the red dust boiled over six hundred tawny backs.

"My God! Was there ever such a mix-up?"

They sat staring at the sea of tossing horns. Shrill yells cut the air like a knife as a dozen men hurled their frenzied ponies over the western crest and drove down upon the fighting herd. Suddenly a dozen bulls in the van of that struggling mass caught the smell of the water down Red Cañon. They threw up their heads and with a bellowing roar broke into a maddened run down the cañon to the sharp thunder of thousands of sharp hoofs and the click-click of two thousand bony hocks that rattled like castanets.

Latigo thrust his pony across the rear of the passing herd and hugged the sheer western wall. That wild stampede would stop in a mile or two.

A rapid fire of shrill yells made him glance over his shoulder. Two riders on the hill above him were frenziedly pointing down the cañon.

For a brief second he stared.

Then he saw.

A woman on a bay pony rode slowly out from the bushes at the base of the cliff-like walls and headed across the face of the stampeding herd.

CHAPTER XI

SAVED FROM THE STAMPEDE

THE wind-borne roar of the stampeding herd came to Doris. A low swell of land cut off her view, but Latigo above her saw all that was about to happen. He saw her suddenly check her pony and give a startled glance up the cañon as the full roar of the growing stampede came to her. Then she lifted her mount to full gallop and whirled him in a burst of speed to pass the head of the running mass. The next moment her pony stepped on a round stone and went down almost in the face of the charging herd.

Boden, his face white, reined back his big grey with an oath, but Latigo acted like a flash. His startled horse knew well the meaning of the frenzied yell that rang in his startled ears. He stretched out like a lambent flame along the ground, taking in his stride rocks and logs and stunted brush as foot by foot Latigo edged him to the flank of the herd. He must pass its head in a hundred yards.

He never knew how he did it. With loose reins and bloody heels he whirled the pony across the very face of the stampede and bore down on Doris, shouting as he came. She could not hear a word he said, but she knew instinctively what to do. She ran from the fallen pony and standing by a big boulder stretched out both arms to him as he came.

He came in a blinding whirl of dust and sun and sweat

and spume and flying gravel. Without check, without pause he leaned out of saddle far to the right, seized both her hands and gave a great lift. It was perfectly simple to the range-bred girl. She gave one little leap as her hands met his and was on the saddle before him, his left arm about her. Then he gave the roan a vicious prod of the spur and sent him flying down the valley.

The wildest stampede lasts but a few miles, but it is hell while it lasts. A dozen waddies warned by the dust and thunder of the mass spurred to meet it with waving blankets and cracking six-guns that spat sparks in the faces of the leaders of that herd, and they turned the head back on itself so that within two miles they began to mill.

Not till then did Latigo pull in his pony. Even then he did not like to release the pretty girl in his arms. There was something very gratifying in the clasp of her arms about his neck, in the warmth of her body next to his.

"Let me down now and—thank you!"

He helped her off and stood abashed.

"You saved my life up there." She nodded towards Red Cañon. "You're a stranger here, aren't you? I never saw you before."

Before he could answer Boden galloped up on his grey.

"As pretty a pick-up as I ever saw on rodeo or anywhere else," he said warmly.

"I'm Doris Kane. My father owns the Lazy M ranch and his men are at work in Red Cañon cleanin' up the ends of the round-up." She paid no attention to Boden, who stood openly admiring her. "Who are you?"

This time it was Boden who answered her.

"My name's Boden," he said frankly. "I was on my

way to the Crutch J when I met up with this man, Mr Jones." He indicated Latigo. "We're on the way to the Crutch J now. We——"

"It wasn't *we* who pulled me out of the track of that herd," said Doris cryptically. That 'we' got on her nerves. She looked at Latigo.

"His name's Jones," said Boden. But Doris turned away. "Old man Kane owes you one for that, anyhow."

"Owes me nothin' for nothin'," said Latigo sharply. "When I need a woman to get me a job I'll be a fit inmate for the Old Men's Home."

He was angry with Boden and with himself, too. Of course he was glad he could help the girl; but what was there in the touch of her arms that set his heart to beating like an engine? So she was the daughter of old Tonkaway Kane, who owned the Lazy M. She was certainly pretty and—— But Doris turned away laughing with some of the men of the outfit and Tonkaway's booming voice beat down all opposition. He forced his way through the crowd and laid a heavy hand on Latigo's shoulder.

"You lookin' for a job?" he asked shortly. "If you are, you've got it. I saw what you did. I'm Tonkaway Kane an' this is my outfit. That's my daughter Doris you pulled out of a mess. Any job you want on the Lazy M is yourn, barrin' only trail-boss. I'm lookin' for him to come any time now."

Boden thrust forward.

"If you're Mr Kane," he said shortly, "I've got a letter for you. My name's Boden—Chris Boden."

Tonkaway eyed him appraisingly and thrust out a hand. Boden 'sized well' and Tonkaway liked his looks. He liked the set of his shoulders, and he was disposed from

his mere name to like him on sight. He was the nephew of his old partner, Wes Duke. He shook hands warmly.

"So you're Chris Boden," he said. "I'm glad to see you, son. Mr Lucas wrote me from Butte that you'd be down as soon as you could make it. Wait just a minute." He turned to Latigo.

"How about takin' on with my spread?" he asked heartily. "We're drivin' north just as soon as we can get our cattle in shape, and I need men. I'll be glad to have you."

"All right, Mr Kane, I'll sign up." Latigo shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "Who's your foreman?"

"I haven't had one for some months. I been handlin' things myself, but Mr Boden here's my trail-boss for the northern drive." He laid a hand on Boden's shoulder. "Listen, boys. This is Chris Boden. He's a nephew of my old partner, Wes Duke. He knows every mile of the northern trail, and he's my trail-boss for the big drive. Get me? Come on, daughter."

The men stood staring after father and daughter as they walked away and headed for the house. Suddenly a red-headed waddie thrust a hand out to Latigo.

"My name's Thom," he said grinning. "That was a good job you done. Anyone who helps Miss Doris has sure got a vote o' thanks from us. I'll show you the bunk-house. Who's this man Boden?" he asked as they turned away.

"Search me," said Latigo briefly. "I never heard of him till I met him at the top of the cañon. He told me he came from the north. Me? I been all over. I'm from Arizona last."

"Ever been north?" asked Thom.

"Sure, but not for five or six years. I rode over the

trail when I came down and, a man don't forget a trail that he's been over once. But they haven't been drivin' many herds north lately."

"I know." Thom's face changed. "Times are hell right now. We've had one hell of a dry spell here. No rain for more 'n a year and the cattle are dyin' on the ranges. That's why old Tonkaway's drivin' north. The Crutch J and the Lazy M, with three other outfits, are poolin' their herds and tryin' to drive north to fat 'em up in the alfalfa country and then take 'em on to a market. It's their last chance to save their bacon. What we leave here we lose. We're drivin' every head o' stock we can rustle out of the hills—cows an' steers an' bulls, too. I hope that man Boden knows his business. I hear he's a nephew of old Wes Duke.

"Well," Red Thom spat judicially, "I wish I was him. That's all. Old Wes left the Crutch J in Tonkaway's hands and he sure has nursed it along. When and where did old Wes die?"

"Boden says he died up in Butte, Montana," said Latigo. "I hear he left a quarter interest in the Crutch J to his nephew Boden and he told me this mornin' that old Kane wrote for him to come down and drive north for him because he knows the trail up north. That's all he told me."

"Huh. Well, we'll see how he shapes up. Old man Tonkaway's got him over at the house now puttin' him through his third degree, I reckon."

Tonkaway was doing more than that. He led Boden into his office, took a bottle from a closet and poured generously.

"So you're old Wes's nephew, huh?" He looked Boden over carefully, and the more he looked at him the

better he liked him. "You haven't met my daughter yet, have you?"

"Never been introduced, if you mean that. I was up in the cañon when that man Jones pulled her out from under the herd. He might have been gentler, I reckon."

"Huh! Neither Doris nor I kick about that. You take hold of what you kin in a case like that. Ever see a man caught in a stampede?"

Boden had seen a man caught once, and he had never forgotten it. That was why his own big grey was not as quick as the roan to get started when Latigo surged down the valley.

"Here she is now," said Tonkaway. "Daughter, let me make you acquainted with Chris Boden. He's old Wes's nephew, you know."

Doris shook hands noncommittally, sat down and crossed one shapely leg over the other and looked Boden over casually, conscious all the time of her father's grinning scrutiny. There was no question of the man's good looks. He was handsome and big and genial. In fact, she felt that if she had not known of that proviso in Wes Duke's will she might have liked Chris Boden at sight, but that will of Wes Duke's built a wall against his nephew. She flashed a look at him.

"So you're goin' to trail us north, are you?"

"I hope so. Speakin' of that, Mr. Kane——" Boden turned to Tonkaway.

"Wait a bit. Let me explain." Tonkaway took the word and explained in detail the pooling of the five herds for the drive north. "We'll have all of twelve thousand head to go. How's the stock up north? Much of it?"

"Plenty. Why?"

"I'll tell you. We're aimin' to play all we've got on

this venture. No use mincin' words. If we fail we're busted flat. This long dry spell has got us all by the neck. I'm takin' along with us a lot of cash. All we can raise right now without mortgagin' the land an' buildin's. We've got twenty-five thousand dollars in gold. We plan to buy all the cattle we can on the way north, fatten 'em in the alfalfa lands and take 'em on to a good market. That way we should clean up."

"That'll strip you here, won't it?"

"Sure, but what we don't take'll die, except the breedin' stock. We've driven that far back in the hills where there's still some water. This is our last play, Boden. Reckon we can pick up the cattle we want?"

"No trouble about that," said Boden. But his face was grim.

"I'm goin' along, too," said Tonkaway. "And I'm aimin' to take Doris with us as well."

"It'll be mighty rough on a girl."

"Sure, but it'll be a new experience for her." Tonkaway did not dare hint that his real reason for taking Doris was to give the nephew of his old partner a chance to win his half of the Crutch J ranch. "I'm tryin' to plan so we'll leave in about three weeks. Reckon you can have a good hold by that time?"

"If I can't there'll be something the matter with my hands." Boden turned to Doris. "How about a ride, Miss Doris?" he asked. "Will you show 'me about the place?"

"Sure she will," said Tonkaway heartily. "Go on, honey."

She could not refuse, and they clattered out of the corral, leaving the bunk-house grinning. Latigo watched them go and gazed after them with a curious look on his

face. Since he had first met Boden at the top of Red Cañon pass he had watched him continually, but he had not formed any opinion about the man. Boden was perfectly frank.

"Too damned frank," muttered Latigo. "A man don't tell as much as he tells without bein' sorry for it some day. I'd like to know——"

But what he would like to know he never said. He wandered off behind the bunk-house and perched himself on the top rail of the corral fence, where he sat deep in thought for hours till old Baldy Stone came to call him to supper.

For a week after the new foreman took charge the men of the Lazy M watched him critically. But Boden gave no ground for any reasonable complaint. The usual jokes played on him he met with a disarming humour. Even the old test of sand-burrs in his shirts met with merely a laugh. Finally the jolt-headed humour of the bunk-house gave way to frank liking. Only Baldy Stone regarded him with doubt, and confided that doubt to Latigo Jones.

"I seen him cheatin' hisself at solitaire the other night," said Baldy profanely. "An' any man who'll do that'll steal bacon rind from a Mexican. What you say, Latigo?"

But again and all the time Latigo said nothing. If his eyebrows went up a trifle at the frequent sight of Boden's big grey and Doris's grey pony rubbing stirrups before the hitch-rack, he said nothing. And that had become a daily sight, to the delight of old Tonkaway. He loved the memory of his old-time partner, and while he did not care for mere money the thought that Doris, whom he loved better than life, would eventually own half of the

Crutch J was balm to him. He had nursed that ranch along with his own for years. He had brought it through bad times, but now the worst times he had ever known had come to him.

"I just don't see how we kin pull through," he growled to Latigo, looking over his fences one morning. "Twelve thousand head sellin' at good prices'll help a lot. It'll pay the interest on the mortgages, anyhow."

To Boden he was franker.

"Old Wes sure left you a joker," he said frankly. "I've nursed the Crutch J through many a hole, but I'm fearin' even my luck an' old Wes's ability, if he was livin', couldn't help much now. We got to get out on time, Chris, before the cattle begin dyin' on our hands. Better see about an inspector as soon as you can."

"I'll run into Velarde to-morrow," promised Boden.

Early in the morning he got the little car from the garage and headed for Velarde, and old Tonkaway, standing on the porch to see him go, had the temerity to turn to Doris.

"He's not so bad," he said. "Like him any better, honey?"

She did not and said so—with reasons.

"I wish he'd stay away for good. Hello," she said warmly as Latigo came up. "What's the matter?"

"Not a thing. I was just thinkin' you haven't had your daily dozen, and now that Boden's gone to Velarde, you'll miss it—unless you ride with me. Some people have all the luck." He grinned a little and saw her change colour. "Some people have all the luck," he said again.

Her eyes sought his for a moment and dropped. "And some people," she said slowly, "have better than luck."

"Then they don't need, luck," said Latigo stoutly.

"Hey, daughter," Tonkaway boomed from the porch, "you goin' to mix me a julep or must I get my own whisky an' greens?"

"I'm coming. I'll poison you myself. Wait."

CHAPTER XII

THE BIG DRIVE BEGINS

VELARDE was the usual cow-town of far-flung Texas. A thirty-mile railroad spur connected it with the main line, and one street stretched along that spur. Boden parked his car before the one little hotel, spent an hour making some obvious purchases, and when the one daily train pulled out for Venice, twenty miles away, Chris Boden was on it. He needed the aid of a long-distance telephone and he dared not use one at Velarde. He knew that the Lazy M would get prompt information of his message.

At Venice he promptly buried himself in a long-distance telephone booth and was hidden for the best part of an hour. When he finally got the connexion, a man more than eight hundred miles away cursed heartily over the wire. Boden's face turned crimson at the words, but he finally managed to get the floor.

"I'd know it's you, Lesson, by your talk. You're a fool, a damned fool, cursing me like that. You might know I didn't call you for nothing. Well, the fat's in the fire. What? Good God! Yes, I can hear you! Shut up and listen to me, will you? Of course it's—me. I'm at Venice because I didn't want to try to wire from Velarde. Got me now? All right. Then listen, damn you! This plan that we agreed on is all wrong. Old Kane is on his last legs. There has been a terrible drought down here. No rains for more than a year, and the cattlemen are all up in the air. The big drive that we heard so

much about is all a fake. It is simply an attempt to get what's left of their cattle north, where they can save them and sell them.

"How many? Yes! They've got about twelve thousand head startin' on the twenty-third. I'm takin' em as trail-boss. Get me? All marryin' deals are off. Clear off! Understand that! In the first place, I don't think I could do it if I wanted to. In the second place, I can make a fortune this other way—if you do as I tell you. This man Kane is trailing twelve thousand head north. They will make the Scalp Rock Crossing over the Rio Nita about the tenth of next month. He carries with him twenty-five thousand dollars in gold to buy cattle with along the trail.

"Yes! Yes! Of course I'm sure. I'm the trail-boss, I tell you. There'll be twenty-two men along and not one knows the northern trail. Get a word to Biggs at Scalp Rock. Tell him all I've told you. I'll meet Biggs and join him at Scalp Rock and we'll make a killin' there."

The other voice cut in sharply, but Boden cut him short. "Understand me, Lesson. Your plans were all wet. It's all simple enough and it can't fail. Tell Biggs what I say. Bye!"

It was late when he got back to Velarde and he spent what was left of the evening drinking tequila with the obliging hotel proprietor who finally, at about nine o'clock, shoved him into the car for his run to the Lazy M. The big-eyed clerk who watched the slow progress of the car grinned.

"By gosh," he murmured, "that's Boden, the new trail-boss for the Lazy M. He's wolfed down near a quart o' tequila like it was ice water."

Big Ben Pearsall grunted.

"Don't you worry none, son. The man don't live who can drink tequila like this man Boden done without rememberin' next day that man is made of earth. His mouth'll taste like a Mexican family's just moved out. I don't envy him his drive."

It was ten o'clock when Boden reached the Lazy M. Lights were still showing in the bunk-house and he could hear laughter. Then old Baldy Stone came out, followed by another dark figure. Boden ran his car into the shed, closed the door and turned away towards the house when he caromed suddenly into a shadowy figure hurrying past him that almost knocked him off his feet. For a moment the glare of the light from the door of the ranch-house blinded him. Then he saw that it was Doris. He caught only a quick little gasp as she started away from him, then he seized her by the arm.

Without that tequila that he had drunk he would never have dared touch her, but that drink had done what days on the Lazy M had made him hope for. He had ridden with her, walked with her, strolled with her about the place and he knew how utterly desirable she was. Also she had made it very plain to him that she could get along very well without him, and that angered him—when he realized it. He tightened his grip on her arm and she strove to get loose.

"Oh," he said stupidly, "I didn't know it was you. I didn't see you."

"You might look where you're running," she flashed at him. "Let go my arm."

He saw her eyes dark with growing anger; then the tequila got in its final word. He pulled her to him roughly.

"One kiss to get loose," he muttered. "Nobody'll ever know."

She struggled in his grip like a wild thing, but he drew her closer and closer, laughing at her futile efforts. His liquor-laden breath sickened her. She fought with all her strength against him, but she was drawn closer and closer. Then——

Something shadowy and dim flashed out across her shoulder. She heard a flat smack and Boden reeled back, staggering, as a low voice that she knew well grated like steel on steel.

"You're ridin' too close, *bombre*. We don't like a crowded trail down here. Remember that next time. Wait till you're asked! Get on into the house, Miss Doris," said the voice. "I'll tend to this swine."

When Boden got to his feet and his balance Doris was gone and he was facing Latigo Jones. He leapt for the figure in a quick jump, but Latigo countered by kicking both feet from under the trail-boss with a wide sweep of his heavily booted foot so that Boden went sprawling.

The heavy fall jarred the wind out of him. He half rose, sick and weak, and his hand went to his gun. Before his fingers found the holster Latigo snatched the gun and threw it into a horse trough. Then he seized Boden by the throat and shook him.

"Here you, Latigo! Let up. What the hell do you think you're doin'?" Tonkaway's iron grip forced his fingers apart.

"I'm aimin' to teach this damned wild hog somethin'—that he's never learned yet," said Latigo between clenched teeth.

But Tonkaway dragged him back and motioned his trail-boss to go. Boden went, swearing vengeance. Even

yet the old ranchman had no idea what had caused the trouble. If he had known he would have manhandled Boden himself, but he suspected it was probably some argument that arose in the bunk-house, and Tonkaway always let the bunk-house settle its own troubles in its own way.

"The fool's been drinkin'," growled Tonkaway. "I can smell that tequila a mile. You let him alone, Jones. No sense in fightin' with the boss. You understand that I've got to back him up if I can."

"Of course. He'll want to fire me. You'd best give me my time now."

"Like hell I will. I'm doin' the firin' and hirin' on the Lazy M. Had supper?"

"Long ago."

"Come up to the house then. There's somethin' I want to talk over with you."

But Tonkaway did little talking, for Doris took charge, and in one hour Latigo Jones, who passed among men as being close-mouthed, told more than he believed was possible. Tonkaway listened over a purring black pipe while Doris prospected her new "claim." It was very evident that she had a prospector's right.

"How long have you known this new trail-boss o' mine?" demanded Tonkaway suddenly.

"I never laid eyes on him till we met at the head o' Red Cañon the day we came in."

"Huh. You reckon he knows as much as he seems to?"

"Why not? He can ride. He knows cattle and he seems to know his business."

"Well, that ain't what I hired him for." Latigo looked his astonishment. "What ails you, son? Did you think

I'm too old to run twelve thousand head o' cattle anywhere on God Almighty's earth? No, sir! When that happens it'll be time for me to cash in, I reckon. I got this here Mr Boden to trail my herds up north because he knows the country and we don't. He's a nephew of my old-time partner, old Wes Duke, who died up in Butte, Montana, and left the ranch or a quarter part of it to this feller Boden. I aim to see can he make good. I'm goin' along on the drive myself, an' I'm takin' Doris here along, too. We'll have our hands full from now on if we're to leave on time. Goin'? Well—good night."

Tonkaway waved a genial good-night to him, but Doris went with him to the stoop. If she stayed there longer than there was any need, if she shook hands unnecessarily, if for an instant her eyes held out a promise to the drifting waddie it was nobody's business. Certainly it was not Tonkaway's.

"That's twice you've helped me," she said softly. "I'm not sure that this last time wasn't more than the first. I think I'd rather die than have that—that beast kiss me."

"You mean you'd die rather'n have a man kiss you?"

"Did I say that?" She laughed into his face. "If I said that I meant it. But that wasn't what I said. Think it over."

That night was an uneasy one for Latigo Jones. He reviewed every hour since his arrival at the Lazy M. And every hour seemed more priceless than the others. It was Doris who marked those hours for him, but till now he had not admitted it to himself. He was glad now that he had settled with Boden.

Boden's bruised face caused covert grins at the bunkhouse. His explanation that he got it "by runnin' into somethin' harder 'n I thought it was" won a grin even

from Latigo, but no man could mistake the armed neutrality between them. Every man in the bunk-house sensed the tenseness.

Every man in that bunk-house had watched Boden from the first moment of his arrival. It was clear that Tonkaway was predisposed in favour of his old partner's nephew. It was also clear to all that Boden coveted Doris and didn't care who knew it. Also it was no secret that Doris openly preferred the dark-faced Latigo. The first day of the big round-up, when the lowing cattle from five brands were gathered in the big pastures of the Lazy M, she made clear to all her preference. Latigo had played an ace that day up Red Cañon when he had swept her from the boulder into his arms in the face of the stampeding herd.

At first he had resented it because he did not like the comments that he feared it would cause. But it was very clear that the men of the Lazy M looked on this in a peculiar way. They were on the pay-roll for keeps and they looked on Doris as on a relative of each man. What she did was all right. If she liked a man it was because that man was worth liking.

Every time Doris suggested riding to Latigo he went, and Boden, seeing it, swore to himself. Latigo could not understand the girl, for his native modesty forbade putting the right interpretation on it. Tonkaway thought he could read signs. It was very clear to him. Doris was using Latigo Jones as a stalking-horse to bring on Boden. He was glad to see it and he often chuckled at his own cleverness in bringing Boden to the Lazy M.

They started the final phase of the round-up at daylight, but Tonkaway's guess was wrong. It took them more than three weeks to comb those back-ranges, but when

it was done, when every Lazy M and Crutch J cow had been gone over for tick and when the other three ranches scheduled for the long drive had close-herded their waiting herds on the bed-grounds of the Lazy M ranch, they numbered close to twelve thousand head.

Those other outfits were astonished when Tonkaway named Boden as the trail-boss for the pooled outfits. There were a dozen men they had rather choose than a stranger, but Tonkaway stood firm. Boden was the nephew of his old partner and he knew the trail.

"I'm going along myself," said old Tonkaway. "I'll be on hand if anything goes wrong. But you needn't worry none. Chris Boden is old Wes Duke's kin and I know the breed."

That night he got out his maps and called Boden in for a conference. The five big owners nodded grim approval as the new trail-boss sketched his plans. They pored over the maps as he marked his future camping places, as he told them of grass and water and bed-grounds on the way north that he had passed over not two months before.

"All right, Boden." Big Jim Larabee of the Flying X hammered him on the back. "It's up to you. I'm sure satisfied if old Tonkaway is. Take hold."

He got them off finally to a late start to let the herds graze after sun-up, for cattle feed best just after dawn, and he herded them leisurely along. Big Willow—six miles. Twelve Trees—ten miles. And after that an average of ten or twelve miles a day, for nothing is easier than to ruin cattle in the first stages of a long drive. It took them from early dawn till late afternoon to finish each day's drive.

It was a primitive procession. Breakfast over, old Baldy with his chuck-wagon headed for the next water

and, with the buckboard close to him, made his day's march and was ready to welcome the men when the herd got in. It took them thirty days to make five hundred miles.

Big Sandy, Crow Hill, Jack Rabbit Flat—each marked the end of a hard day's toil. Then they worked up the valley of the San Simon and across the back ranges of the Peloncillo. It was there that things began to happen.

CHAPTER XIII

LATIGO LEARNS OF A PLOT

LATIGO, coming in from herd-guard for coffee, found Tonkaway and Doris sitting by a small fire by Doris's tent, while old Baldy clashed among his pans at the chuck-wagon. Tonkaway called to Latigo and handed him a filled cup.

"Seen Boden anywhere?" he asked shortly.

"I saw him about a half-hour ago. He don't stop to chat with me much, you know."

Latigo grinned and Doris laughed a little. It was no secret to her that Boden hated the very sight of Latigo. If old Tonkaway noticed it, he gave no sign.

"How're the cattle standin' the trip, Latigo?"

"Fine. They're quiet enough. I thought last night we were in for trouble. A little after dark a coyote slipped into the herd and nipped a new-born calf and the cow started to raise the devil. Of course we couldn't shoot. It would have stampeded the herd, so I had to rope him. Even then the smell of the blood drove a lot of 'em half crazy for a while. Me an' Boden nearly locked horns over that."

"What? Why?"

"Your fine trail-boss was keen on shootin' that coyote. It took me and Stevens both to stop him. A little more an' we'd had twelve thousand head o' cattle to gather up in ten miles of prairie."

"Boden seems to know the trail," said Tonkaway.

"Why wouldn't he know it? He says he's been over it. I've been over it, too, but that was some years ago. But I could travel it in the dark if I had to."

Tonkaway gave a quick little exclamation.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me you know the trail?" he demanded. "I owe you somethin', young fellow, for what you did in Red Cañon that day. I'd rather have you handlin' the herd than Boden if I'd only known you knew the road. What in hell makes you so close-mouthed?"

"I was raised that way, Mr Kane. Up where I come from I found out it didn't pay to talk too much. It cost me my father and a good friend to learn that much."

His face hardened, and Tonkaway wondered what could have cut such deep lines in so young a face.

"Want to tell me?" The old man leaned forward. The history of the West was an open book to him.

"'Member hearin' of the war between the sheepmen and the cattlemen in Montana and Wyoming?" asked Latigo.

"Good God, boy, who hasn't heard of it?" Tonkaway did not consider it necessary to tell that some friends of his own had gone to take part in that very war and had not come back. "Go on."

Latigo went on. He mentioned no names, but he gave the details of what happened with such exactness that father and daughter knew that every word was true.

"That was how the Nighthawks got to be named," he said finally.

"This man Biggs was head of 'em. I didn't believe it for a long time, and my father was not convinced of it

till the day they killed him. You see, the way things panned out, dad and I had the dope that would have hung this man Biggs and his partner, Tyler. That was why he got his crowd and got us. And that is where we made our big mistake. Dad was always afraid of bein' known as a bad man. He was the quickest man with a gun that I ever saw, but he was the only man I ever knew who never presumed on it.

"There's no question about it; the Nighthawks took their orders from this man Biggs. There's no question about it. He killed my father! Also——"

A shade crossed Latigo's face and seemed to harden in his eyes and mouth. It was hardly as much as a shade, but a coolness seemed to settle on his hearers. It was as though the forerunner of death had passed over them.

"All these things come out right," he said grimly. "It was after my dad was killed that I left."

"Been driftin' ever since?" inquired Tonkaway.

"I came south on this trail as far as this very Scalp Rock Crossin'. Then I headed west into New Mexico and down into Old Mexico and Arizona. After that I drifted back and rode with the Double Diamond outfit an'—I reckon that's about all," he ended lamely. "It sure has been a mess sometimes to have my hands tied the way the old man did it."

"How do you mean he tied your hands?" demanded Tonkaway.

"A promise is tighter 'n rawhide," quoth Latigo. "He made me promise him that I'd never pack a gun. I didn't want to promise him that, but he was dyin', and he feared I'd be a killer."

"I sec." Tonkaway's eyes gleamed. "That might be

an awkward thing to do, tie a man's hands like that. Ain't you ever had to put up a scrap?"

"Once or twice, especially down in Sonora, but I managed without a gun."

"What's this Scalp Rock Crossin' you spoke of?" demanded Tonkaway irrelevantly.

"It's the main crossin' over the Nita. It used to be used by the big herds before the railroad days. It was marked by a big pinnacle of rock in the ford. It had been struck so often by lightnin' that it was scaled right down to water level. The Indians call it Scalp Rock. It's been struck a dozen times, they say."

"I thought lightning never strikes twice in the same place," said Doris.

"As a rule it don't. The place ain't there after the first time. When I came through there was one store at the crossin'. It was a log cabin kept by a squint-eyed old Chinaman named Look Long. He used to trade supplies for hides and calves born on the beddin'-ground. When I came through two men were tryin' to hold the old man up. I managed to help him a bit and he wanted to give me the whole darned store. I reckon he's gone by this time."

"Boden said he was headin' for the Scalp Rock Crossin'."

"He's right, too," said Latigo grudgingly. "It's the only ford for miles. Well, thanks for the coffee, Miss Doris. I reckon I'll turn in."

He crept into his blankets, nestled his head on his saddle and pulled the end of the tarp over him.

When Doris had gone to her tent old Tonkaway sat long over the fire. He was beginning to have doubts of his trail-boss. True, he knew the country and he certainly

knew his business, but Tonkaway's trail-trained eyes saw things that he did not like. 'He saw that the men deferred to Latigo Jones and paid little attention to Boden. He saw the orders of the trail-boss grudgingly obeyed. He saw disorganization among the men, and he saw little jealousies and differences develop into affairs of magnitude that, because of Boden, had to be left to Tonkaway himself to settle.

Boden was slack. No question about that. He acted as though he had been paid off and was only waiting a chance to quit. If he himself took hold, it would be a tacit admission that he had made a mistake in selecting his trail-boss, and Tonkaway would not admit his own failure in judging men. Too, there were many days of the drive yet ahead of them. If he had to 'fire' Boden from his job there was always Latigo Jones who knew the trail just as well as Boden.

But he did not want to change trail-bosses in the middle of a drive. He sat late and pondered the matter. Why did Doris so plainly dislike Boden? That bothered him, too. Also he thought not a little of that twenty-five thousand dollars in cash that lay in the wagon.

Under his tarp Latigo lay, wide awake. His long talk had opened up vistas of thought to his active brain and he was puzzled. Boden bothered him, too. Himself quiet and self-contained, he could not understand Boden's loquacity. The constant rebuffs from the men would have penetrated the hide of harder men than he. He talked too much and said too little.

Why had he never shown any active resentment for the time that Latigo had assaulted him? That was not human nature. Who was Boden? Where had he come from? Even to himself, Latigo could not admit that the

real reason for his dislike for the trail-boss¹ was because of his devotion at first to Doris. His own quarrel with Boden did not disturb him. He could settle that at any time.

"Confound him. I know he's as crooked as a snake, but I can't make out his entire play. The man has changed ever since that day he drove into Velarde. He hasn't been the same since."

He pulled out the corner of the tarp and dropped into an uneasy slumber.

"Time to git out, Latigo." Old Baldy shook him. "They're havin' trouble with the cattle."

He was up instantly and knew at once what was the matter. A strong north-east wind was damp with the river-smell and the herd had made a dry camp. No wonder they were hard to hold. Lush grass, shoulder high, dew-wet grazing at dawn, and that heavy, sweet damp river-smell that promised water. The tired night herds-men swept in for coffee while Tonkaway, with Doris, rode out to watch the start.

"Look out for that bald-faced devil."

Latigo jerked his hand at a huge steer plunging out of the heavy mist. Doris laughed, reined her pony aside and struck the great steer with her quirt as he blundered past.

"My saddle needs cinching," she said. "Go on. I'll join you."

In a moment she was out of the saddle and, with head down, tugged at the cinch. It was the moment that steer had hoped for. With a deep-throated bellow and a quick flirt of his great head he leaped into full charge.

Doris's pony never waited. His startled leap took

him ten feet away from her, and she stood with sun-dazzled eyes, a perfect target for the thousand-pound avalanche.

Latigo had no time even to gasp. To rope the beast was impossible. And he carried no gun! Then his right hand flew down and up. Followed a quick, dull flash and glitter and the steer plunged forward on his knees with a ten-inch knife quivering in the centre of his forehead. Tonkaway gasped.

"By James!" he exploded. "I've seen quick things, but this beats all. Scared, little daughter?"

Of course she was scared and shaken, but she would not admit it. The look that she gave Latigo Jones was neither cold nor distant.

"That's the third time I'm in your debt," she said quietly, with a little quiver in her voice. "I want some coffee. Much obliged, Mr Toreador."

She swung into saddle and headed back for the wagon.

Latigo smiled, but Tonkaway did not. Levity was far from him.

"So that's what you meant when you told me you never used a gun in a scrap," he said. "Show me."

Latigo walked to a mesquite tree and stuck a silver dollar in a crotch. Then he stepped off thirty feet and turned to Tonkaway.

"Count four," he said. "Keep your eyes on me and count four."

"One—two—three—four. By God!"

At two he heard rather than saw a sharp whir. He saw Latigo's hands move down and up, and when he stared at the tree he saw an inch above and below the dollar two ten-inch bowie-knives quivering with the force of the throw.

"I don't need a gun at short range," said Latigo quietly, "and target practice costs nothin'. I can do it at the fireside. People don't know what a knife is for. I learned that down in Sonora. Well"—he turned campward—"here comes Boden. I reckon he'll make Scalp Rock Crossin' to-night."

Boden rode up quickly.

"I been scoutin' the trail a bit," he said. "We'll make Scalp Rock Crossin' by night and water on the way. I'll keep Baldy behind with the wagon. I'm goin' ahead again to-day. I want to have a look at the crossin' before we try to make it. Jones, you take charge. I may not be back till night. You'll find water for the herd in a draw about ten miles from here. The banks to the Puerco river are mighty steep. If I'm not back before you reach the draw, close-herd the outfit. They may break for water after a long march."

"I thought you said to water in a draw."

"There ought to be water there. Maybe there ain't."

"We made a dry camp last night," said Latigo. "It's a damned good thing the dew was heavy. You must think you're drivin' sheep . . ."

That was a direct insult, but Boden laughed over his shoulder as he caught up a fresh horse and saddled him.

All the day the herd straggled along over a bare range. All grass had been eaten off and the reason was plain. The drought that cleaned out the Lazy M and its neighbours was far-reaching. Other herds were driving north on the same mission. It was dark when they finally bedded the herd, and Boden had not returned. Latigo paused at the chuck-wagon and hailed Tonkaway.

"I'm goin' to ride on a bit," he said. "Boden may be delayed and we've got to know about the crossin'. As

"I remember the land, we're only about three miles from the crossin'. I'll be back spon. The herd is all right and the guards are out."

He rode off, leaving them staring after him.

Behind him the cattle lowed dismally. There was not nearly water enough. The few scattered stagnant pools were soon trampled into ooze and the herd milled uncertainly. They would be hard to hold to-night. He rode quickly, heading due north. He knew the river was not more than four miles away, but if that herd ever came within running distance of it they would break their necks to get to water, and the banks were high and steep. It was too late to cross to-night.

He rode slowly, deep in thought. Not one of those thoughts was for the trail-boss nor even for the herd. He was dreaming of Doris as she had looked that morning when the big steer drove to his knees. He could not be mistaken about the look in her eyes. Even now it gave him a warm feeling at the heart to remember how she looked. And that man Boden had the nerve to—— Pshaw! What a coil it all was! He knew that nowhere in the land could he find a girl who could compare with Doris, but—what would she say or do when she knew? And she was bound to know shortly. He could not keep it secret longer. It was certainly due to her.

The short, sharp whinny of a startled horse made him pause. He was out of saddle in an instant and seized his pony's nose to keep him from answering. No man but a fool would ride a stallion with cattle. A stallion always whinnies, and on a quiet night such a noise may stampede a restless herd. That was Boden's stallion. He knew the whinny. What was Boden doing here?

He dropped his reins and, leaving Possum in the brush,

headed for that whinny. Again it came and gave him the direction. He had crossed a low ridge covered with mesquite when he heard a voice that he knew instantly. It was Boden! Latigo crept closer till the shapes of the men bulked big in the darkness. Boden was there, and another man, hunched up under a bush. Both men beld their horses by the reins.

"I tell you things can't be better," said Boden sharply. "It's all the better for me that the first plan failed. Here, listen. It was all fixed up. I was to go to the Crutch J and claim the share of Wes Duke's property that he left under his will to his nephew. That's all right. Then Lucas, who engineered the whole thing, said we'd sell out right away and divide the profits.

"His plan was for me to come to the Lazy M, get the share of the Crutch J that was willed to Chris Boden, sell it all off and divide the loot. Then he saw what old Duke stipulated about his' nephew marryin' Doris Kane, the daughter of his old partner. When we found that out, it put a different face on the thing. I might play Chris Boden long enough to make the sale, but I sure couldn't do it long enough to marry the girl.

"I was willin' enough to try, but when I got down there I found the whole thing blew up. They were drivin' the herds north to get rid of 'em. All that's left down there is the land itself. Old Tonkaway Kane has got every dollar he's got in the world right with him. He's got two hundred thousand dollars' worth of cattle with him and he's got twenty-five thousand dollars in gold in the wagon. That's why I sent that message to get word to Biggs about the Scalp Rock Crossin'. Did he get that message?"

"Yes. Don't worry about that. What's the dope?"

Boden laughed outright.

"It's so simple that you'll think you're a fool for not thinkin' of it before. Thanks to this drought down South, old Tonkaway with some twenty-three men are drivin' a pooled herd of twelve thousand head to Scalp Rock Crossin'. All right. Biggs is there and he's got his men. He can ferry and get the ferryin' charges and lift the herd after he's been paid for takin' it across. After that there's the twenty-five thousand that old man Kane's got."

"Huh! I didn't you say the girl is with her father?"

"Yes. She's a pretty piece, too. I'll take her off your hands."

"I thought you said you've got no chance to marry her."

"Maybe I will after this," said Boden. "I'll go over with you now, Welch. I want to see Biggs and get it started. It's time for me to leave the outfit anyhow. All Biggs has got to do is to stampede the outfit after they've crossed. Get the ferry charges first. Come on."

Biggs! It was Biggs then! The name slapped Latigo Jones in the face as with a giant hand. Lucas, too! Lucas from Drybone! It could be no other! Lucas who must have engineered this entire scheme.

Latigo sat for a little, appalled. What was he up against now. For a brief moment the world whirled in chaos and his eyes seemed hidden in a crimson flood.

Biggs was here! Biggs, his arch enemy! Biggs, whom he had sworn to kill for the murder of his father. All thought of the wretched actor, the pseudo Chris Boden, dropped from him. Some day he meant to square matters with the ex-trail-boss, but surely Simon Biggs was delivered into his hands.

He half rose and watched them mount and ride off, silhouetted against the sky, and when the noise of their departing hoof-beats died away he went to his pony, led him back a hundred yards to deaden the sound of his feet, then swung into saddle and headed for camp at a gallop.

CHAPTER XIV

"THE HERD GOES THROUGH"

"GET Tonkaway at once, Baldy." Latigo dragged heavily at old Baldy's leg. "Tell him I got to see him at once."

At Baldy's first touch old Tonkaway came to instant life.

"Well," he said sharply, "what ails you? Somethin' wrong with the cattle?"

"Damned bad news," said Latigo shortly. "That trail-driver of yours is a damned crook, Mr Kane." And in a few curt words he told Tonkaway all that he had seen and heard. "I knew Boden at once," he went on. "I don't know the other man. It's a well-laid plot to get you and your herd in a jam and then rustle the whole thing. Boden told 'em about the cash on the wagon. They must have a lot of men at Scalp Rock. When I came down last time there was only one store there. Anyhow, we can't drive the herd back, and we can't hold 'em here. If we try to turn 'em back, the whole herd'll stampede."

"How about another crossin'?"

"None for miles. If those men mean trouble, they'll sure start it the minute you turn the herd. We got to go ahead. We can't stop here."

"But, my God, man! What's he after? What's his object?"

"Huh! What's the object of any hold-up, man?" said Latigo shortly. "I was sure there was some crooked work afoot. I never did like the cut of his hair, but I couldn't give it a name."

"Well, by——" Old Tonkaway's voice rumbled and boomed above the lowing of the restless cattle and woke Doris. She came to the door of her tent, and her eyes, dark from sleep, looked very lovely in the firelight.

"What's the matter, daddy? Hello, Latigo. What are you awake at this hour of the night for? What are you talkin' about?"

"We're talkin' about that damned crooked trail-boss of mine," boomed Tonkaway. "He's as crooked as a dog's hind leg, and he's led us into a nice mess." In a few words he told Doris what he knew. "I just don't seem to *sabe*," he said, with a hot oath, "how Chris Boden, old Wes's nephew, can turn out to be a crook. I can't hardly come to believe it. But he is!"

"Hold on," said Latigo grimly. "He isn't. You're dead wrong there. Chris Boden's straight."

"Oh, hell!" Tonkaway leapt to his feet. "You're as as crazy as a loon. In one breath you tell me that you heard my trail-boss layin' plans for the hold-up of my herd and then you tell me that this Chris Boden's straight. How in hell kin that be?"

"Because," said Latigo Jones, "I happen to be Chris Boden."

Tonkaway gaped openly at him and Doris moved forward with a quick little exclamation.

"Are you crazy or am I?" demanded Tonkaway. "What's all this? If you're Chris Boden, who in hell is my trailboss?"

"Darned if I know," said Latigo. "But I mean to find out. Wait. I'll prove what I say."

He tore open his saddle-bags and pulled out some papers.

"Here're a couple of letters from men I knew to me a

couple of years ago. Here's a bill of sale of a horse in Arizona and the certificate of a brand inspector in Arizona. Need anything more besides this photograph?"

Tonkaway examined them dazedly with Doris peering over his shoulder. Her eyes were big with surprise and her pretty lips half-parted in a growing smile.

"Then who was this—this trail-boss who said he was Chris Boden?" demanded Tonkaway again.

"I can't quite figure it out," said Latigo. "All I know is that I was on my way to the Lazy M. I heard down in Arizona that Uncle Wes was dead and that he left me a stake in the Crutch J, so I headed for the place. Up at the head of Red Cañon I ran into this man. He said his name was Chris Boden. That was all right. There might possibly be two Chris Bodens, but before I could tell him that was my name, too, he up and told me he was old Wes's nephew and he had a job on the Lazy M. Right then I laid off tellin' my name. I wanted to see what his game was. If he's runnin' under my brand, he's doin' it for a reason. I wanted to know what that reason was. Now I know."

"What was it?" demanded Tonkaway ruthlessly.

Latigo glanced at Doris and looked embarrassed. "I reckon it was kind o' mixed at first," he said. "But from what I heard a bit ago he was plumb sure of what he wanted."

Doris coloured warmly and finally laughed.

"Daddy wanted me to marry him," she said accusingly.

"Not a bit of it—unless you wanted to," said Tonkaway stolidly. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?" he asked curtly of Latigo.

"There would have been two of us claimin' the same name. You'd not have known which to believe."

"Is that your only reason?" demanded Tonkaway.
"When'd you hear from Wes last?"

"About a year before he died. When that man said his name was Chris Boden I just told him the first name that came into my head. It was a name I picked up—'Jones.' I was headin' for the Lazy M myself."

"You knew about his will?"

"I—I heard a little about it," said Latigo uncomfortably. "I didn't want to trade on bein' his nephew."

"I'm beginnin' to see," mumbled Tonkaway, who really saw not at all.

But Doris saw and was furious. She had liked this new man Latigo since their first meeting in Red Cañon, when he had saved her life. She had repelled the advances of the putative Chris Boden simply because he did not appeal to her. At first his tentative advances were so baldly covetous that she did not like him. She was satisfied that the man knew of Wes Duke's will and that he wanted to marry her to get the half of the Crutch J ranch. But now things were different. If Latigo was right, this pretended Chris Boden had gone. But what of the real Chris Boden?

She flushed with wrath as she realized that she had been frankly fond of Latigo Jones as Latigo Jones. He had saved her life on two separate occasions. He had won a high place in her regard, and all the time he was Chris Boden. He was his uncle's nephew. He knew of the will. He knew that if he married her he would inherit half the Crutch J, and he had deliberately come down to look her over. To see if it were worth while to marry her! At the thought, her anger rose like a storm.

Tonkaway missed it all. He simply saw in this skinnier youngster before him the proven nephew of his old

friend. This was the real Chris. This man who had snatched from the face of the crazy herd the daughter old Tonkaway adored, this man who had knifed that plunging steer, was of the breed of old Wes Duke. Tonkaway knew the breed and he loved it. He knew now that his heart had gone out to this Latigo Jones as it had never done to the putative Chris Boden.

"You take hold at once as trail-boss," he said grimly. "Goin' to take your right name? We've called you 'Latigo' so long now that it'll be hard to change."

"No use changin' now," said Latigo. "It's a pretty good name anyhow." He smiled at Doris. "Don't you agree with me, Miss Doris?"

"Agree with you? I wouldn't agree with you if you said black was black. I hate the very sight of you!"

She whirled into her tent, leaving Tonkaway staring after her. But when Latigo went off to his job, Tonkaway strode over to her tent.

"Look here, honey," he remonstrated. "Doggoned if I kin *save* you. I thought you liked this young Latigo an' disliked the other. Don't you like Latigo after all he did?"

"Like him? I hate the very sight of him. Why, he just came down here posing as a stranger to see if I was worth marryin'. To see if the daughter of Tonkaway Kane was good enough to be his wife!"

"Wanted to see if he was buyin' a pig in a poke," said Tonkaway unwisely.

"Oh, go to the devil, daddy!" said Doris wrathfully. "And take your new trail-boss with you! I prefer the old one."

But Tonkaway instead went to Baldy Stone.

"Get me that man Boden's war bag," he said. "I

want to see who he is—or was. I reckon he's gone for keeps."

But that search showed nothing. Boden had left little: a couple of sacks of tobacco, some soiled underclothing, and a pair of gloves. He had evidently prepared in advance for his sudden departure.

"I'd like to know who he was," growled Tonkaway.

"What difference does it make?" demanded Latigo at his elbow. "We're in a nice mess anyway. We can only do one thing—take the herd on at daylight. We'll know then what we've got to face. One thing is sure. This man never planned to do this alone. He must have pretty heavy backin' to plan to hold up a herd with twenty-three waddies on the roll. That man told him last night that this man Biggs has got a hundred men."

"I thought you said there's only one store at this Scalp Rock Crossin'."

"That was five years ago," said Latigo.

"I'll turn the boys out. We got to pull out at daylight."

First daylight came slowly, a dim, faint gleam on the horns of the cattle as they rose lumberingly from their bedding-places. A low thunder of lowing grew and the breath from their nostrils rose like a cloud of steam. Cows, newly calved during the night, lowed fitfully, and away off to the front of the herd Red Thom's voice boomed out, keeping time to the step of his pony:

"I take my bridle in my hand
An' gaily cross the Rio Grande;
I cinch my saddle an' I go
Into the lan' o' Mexico . . .

"Hey, there, button-head, grub ready yit?"

Baldy Stone's reply was profane and pointed.

"You fellows hurry up and eat," quoth Latigo. "Lee, get the remuda up at once."

A man tied an end of a rope to the front wheel of the chuck-wagon, ran it out fifty feet and turned it at right angles about a bush as the horse-wrangler herded the remuda into the angle of the rope. The men hastily caught up their horses from the squealing bunch as old Baldy threw the unused fuel back into the 'cooney.'

"You the new trail-boss, Latigo?" Weston grinned over his tin cup as Tonkaway faced them.

"You said it, Weston," he said. "Listen, boys!" He told them exactly what had happened. "Now you boys ain't paid to fight the battles of the Lazy M. We're sure to have big trouble here if Latigo heard aright. I'm lookin' for it, but I ain't askin' any men to stand by me here. If any wants to quit right now there'll be no hard feelin's."

"You're a darned old skinflint, Tonkaway." Big Bill Stevens thrust him aside. "I been on the Lazy M payroll for six years. You've been payin' me forty a month an' my keep an' now you're figurin' on firin' somebody just when we may have a nice l'il scrap to pass the time. You go to hell. Look here, Latigo, you're the trail-boss, I hear tell. What you aimin' to do with this herd?"

"The herd goes through," said Latigo grimly.

"Then what the hell are we fussin' about? All ready to take her through when you say the word."

"You take charge here, Stevens. I'm goin' to ride ahead to have a look at the crossin'." Latigo swung his saddle on his pony and deftly cinched it. "Bring the herd along slow, Bill."

"I'm comin' with you, Latigo," quoth Tonkaway, climbing into the buckboard where Doris had already

seated herself. Her eyes were alight with excitement and dark with wrath as she stared straight over the head of the new trail-boss.

"Hit the trail, Latigo!"

Tonkaway picked up the reins and urged his team ahead in the track of his trail-boss.

CHAPTER XV

BIGGS AGAIN

THEY left the herd, already beginning to struggle out on the trail, and they headed north-west across a sea of grass that rose in a swale to a long ridge that gave on the river-valley. For four miles they drove along, expecting at any moment to sight the sort of river-valley that they knew. This was different—just a broad valley, treeless but for some stunted mesquite and miles of brown grassland.

"Yonder's the river." Latigo stopped his pony by Doris. "See the flat rock in the middle? It's been struck so often by lightning that it's been cut down from a peak to what it is now. Great guns!" he said suddenly. He stared hard from under the shadow of his hand. "What's that, Tonkaway?" he asked sharply. "Have my eyes gone back on me or is that a town over yonder?"

Below them the yellow mud-mass of the river swirled a half-mile wide between steep banks. Those banks extended for miles up and down the river, making a barrier impassable for men or boats. The herd could cross only at the ford. This was certainly Scalp Rock Crossing. He knew the flat rock that he had pointed out to Doris, but on the far shore stood a group of houses. He could not trust his eyes.

"Is that a town?" he asked again. "There was only one store here when I came through five years ago. What in the world is *that*?" His finger pointed to a black line

that crossed the river high in air. There was no mistaking it. It was a heavy iron-wire cable buttressed at each end. A huge flat boat at the northern end rocked in the yellow flood. "They've built a town and a ferry," he said. "I wonder. Look at that, will you."

A dozen shots rang out on the quiet air, vicious puffs of white smoke leaped suddenly up, and a chorus of shrill yells rose as a score of little black figures ran about like ants in an ant-hill. Suddenly a sort of order came out of the chaos.

"They're chasin' somebody," quoth Tōnkaway excitedly. "Gosh, but he can run! Look, will you!"

One small black spot separated from the mass and moved rapidly towards the river. They could see the man flogging his leg with his hat as he leapt over piles of rubbish in his path till he pitched down the river-bank. Instantly he sprang on the great flat boat, thrust it from the shore, hauled on the after rope and in an instant was in the grip of the whirling current.

That ferry was cunningly contrived. With the boat at a forty-five degree angle to the current it was swept rapidly forward. Slowly though it moved it was fifty feet from the bank when the first pursuer raced to the water's edge and cursed in impotent wrath. The next moment three men on crazy ponies raced for the landing and plunged into the flood behind the boat.

"The fools," said Latigo, watching eagerly. "Even if they catch the boat they can't get on it to get the man." He left his pony and leaned over the river-bank. "Look, will you!"

Caught in the full sweep of the racing current the three plunging ponies were swept down below the clumsy boat but, cruelly rowelled by their frenzied riders, they swam

breast-high. Two shots rang from the riders but the bullets went wide. The next moment the flat boat swept in to the bank and the man on it fled for cover while the exhausted ponies staggered up the slope below the boat.

Startled yells lifted the tired horses into full stride for a few yards and they plunged after the running man. He reached the top of the bank a scant twenty yards in front of the pursuers and for the first time saw the buckboard. In a moment he was at the near wheel, clawing at Tonkaway's sleeve.

"For God's sake, help me, will you?" he panted. "Them men are after me."

"Good Lord!" said Tonkaway grimly. "Who could have guessed it? Just one question, young feller me lad. What you been doin'?"

There was no time to answer. The three pursuers swept along in full cry, and the man shamelessly crawled under the buckboard and lay flat, while Latigo came up on the far side.

"Any little thing we can do for you, gentlemen?" he asked as two of the pursuers checked their ponies. The third was some distance in their rear.

The two men stared at him. They were hopelessly unconventional, low-browed, unshaven, clad in rough canvas overalls, flannel shirts and heavy five-gallon hats with broad leather bands, but Latigo noted that their belts and holsters were new and the rifles were of the latest make.

The third man came up with a rush, and at sight of Latigo stopped his pony on his haunches and stared unbelievably at him. Latigo looked long at him, and recognition dawned slowly in his eyes. Even Doris

noticed how his lips set in a straight line and how his eyes blazed with a curious consuming fire.

"It was Biggs! Biggs of Drybone! The man who had murdered his father. The man he had sworn to kill if he had to do it with his naked hands. His father's murderer stood before him.

His first impulse was to snatch his knife from its sheath and cut the man to ribbons. He thought grimly of his promise to his father never to carry a gun, and he grinned at the thought. A gun was so useless in a case like this. He remembered Look Chang and his lessons with a thrill of gratitude. He knew that he was a better man for having known Look Chang. Cold steel makes cold nerve and, thanks to Look Chang, he had them. He was master of himself. But something else had to be done before he could settle with the murderer.

The herd must cross. He was trail-boss now and he must do first the work for which he drew pay. That is the creed of the trail.

"You know me, Biggs," he said grimly. "I'm Chris Boden. Of course you know I mean to kill you for murdering my father. I'm Chris Boden!"

Biggs's jaw dropped. He stood as a man paralysed. He had not at first recognized Chris; recognition came slowly, and as it came stark fear rose, too.

This was the real Chris Boden. The Chris Boden he had hoped was dead! But this, the Chris Boden who had risen from the dead, was a man who would have his pound of flesh. That was plain.

"My—my name's not Biggs. It's Boggs—Sam Boggs," he said.

Latigo laughed. The fear was so frankly written on the man's face that anyone could read it.

"Your name's Boggs here, is it?" he asked. "You were wise to take another. I'll square up with you before you change again."

Biggs stared at him. His brain was in a whirl. Every superstitious qualm that he had ever known fought for utterance and for belief. He had firmly believed Chris Boden dead and for more than four years he had lived in that hope. He firmly believed that with his Nighthawk followers he had finally removed from his trail any danger that could come from this man, and now he had come to life again.

How had the real Chris Boden turned up here?

What did it mean? Had Lem Silas double-crossed John Lucas and himself? Was his own hiding-place known to the law. He knew what his fate would be if he ever went back to Drybone. Latigo sensed his trouble and grinned.

"I'd rather see you here, Biggs," he said grimly, "than any other man in the world. What's your row with this man?"

He pointed to the fellow panting like a dog under the buckboard, where Tonkaway and Doris eyed him in frank astonishment.

Boggs, to give him his lately taken name, temporized. There was much that he could not explain—that he could only explain in part by a belief that he was at last getting paid for his works. From time to time his gaze strayed to Doris. He had never seen a girl like her in any of his wanderings. But always as he stood sparring for wind and time his eyes came back first to Latigo. It was plain that the sight of this man had played havoc with the hard man of Scalp Rock.

It was more than evident, too, that the sight of Doris

intrigued him. He had never seen a girl like her along the trail. Her pretty face, her alluring shape, her attractive manner all held his attention so plainly that even Webb and Stubbs, his companions, grinned appreciatively. This girl was vastly different from the unkempt slatterns who cooked meals and bore children with equal regularity in Scalp Rock.

Biggs's eyes finally strayed to the man under the buckboard and settled on him malevolently.

"I was to pay him five hundred dollars to come to Scalp Rock and make rain for us," he said slowly. "He took the job. He ordered his supplies an' he come down to do it. He's been boardin' free for a week an' there ain't no sign of rain. His name is Opp."

"Five hundred dollars to—do—what?" demanded Tonkaway dazedly.

"Make me rain," said Biggs hotly. "R-a-n-e, if you want it spelled out. What they wash babies in."

"Huh. From the looks of you, you know mighty little about washin'," quoth Tonkaway. "How about it, Opp?"

Opp thrust his head out from between the wheels.

"Part o' that's half so," he said. "I signed the contract and I ordered the supplies. They're bein' freighted down here now. He'll git his rain if he'll wait a bit. Even I can't make rain in five days. They'll be in tomorrow."

"Supplies? What kind of supplies do you need to make rain?"

"Rain," said Opp didactically, "is water. Water is H_2O . That means hydrogen an' oxygen, gentlemen. If he gives me time I'll mix them elements in just proportions—an—I hope to God they drown him," he added fiercely. "But he's got to wait a bit."

"That's only fair," said Tonkaway, grinning. "Climb in the buckboard, Opp. I'll see you git fair play. What's the meanin' of that ferry there?" he demanded.

"It means what you see," said Biggs. "We built this town so we can handle the north-bound traffic of the big herds. I've been here for more 'n two years now. And I ain't goin' to be chased out now by you and a bunch o' cow-men. You kin bank on that. Is this jack-leg workin' fer you?" He turned to the astonished Tonkaway.

Tonkaway said nothing. He glanced tentatively at Latigo for an answer. Latigo grinned a little but there was no mirth in that grin.

"Did you bring the Nighthawks along with you from Drybone?" he asked casually. "Been paintin' any horses lately, Biggs. I know quite a few stunts that you pulled off in the old days before you dropped to murder. Tell him what I've got to do with you," he said to Tonkaway.

"He's my trail-boss," said the big man quietly. "He tends to all my business and he does it right. Get me? I'm takin' this man Opp to camp," he said to Latigo. "I reckon I better wait till some of these plug-uglies get away."

Biggs turned to his two men.

"Git on back to Scalp Rock," he said gruffly. "I want a private talk with this man."

They turned their ponies' heads and rode slowly back to the ferry, and Biggs turned curtly to Latigo.

He was completely upset by the appearance of this man. It was surely more than mere coincidence that brought him to cross his path again. Superstition, which was never very far from Biggs's mind, suggested that it was to pay for the murder of Sam Boden. More than

once he had regretted that murder. It was all so unnecessary. His flight from Drybone by which he had forfeited all the property he had painfully acquired there had saved his neck and if he had not killed Sam Boden he would not have had to run away.

"I—I s'pose you've told all you know about me," he said curtly.

"Me? Hardly. I've had other things to talk about. Besides that I was really afraid you had died. I'd have been sorry for that. I mean it," he said, seeing disbelief written large in Biggs's face. "Four years ago I promised myself and a good friend of mine, Look Chang, that some day I will cut your heart out. I meant that, Biggs. I'm giving you a fair warning." Don't forget that you and I have a score to settle. I'll pay it. I'll pay you cent for cent for the old man shot to death in the arroyo behind the Lying Cross, for the shot that wounded Look Chang, the best friend a man ever had, and for my own score, too. First of all I've got to get this herd through. That's my present business. When that's done; when I've done what I'm paid to do, then I'll have time to pay off my private scores. Don't worry, Biggs. I'll pay. Keep your hand away from your holster. I'll plug you as quick as I'd kill a side-winder if you make a false move."

Biggs's hand came back with a jerk, and he grinned ingratiatingly.

"I got some other matters to talk over with you if you're this man's trail-boss," he said. "Is that right?"

"Yes. I'm runnin' the herd since your crooked friend left. I know your damned thievin' game, Biggs, and I'm tellin' you right now. My job right now is the herd. When that's done—look out. Next time we meet look for trouble."

Biggs grinned uneasily. .

"How about crossin' yore herd?" he said. "Ferryin' charge fifty cents a head."

"We're not payin' hold-up charges. I'll ford."

"I've got a lot o' rifles in Scalp Rock that say you won't cross here without payin'. It's twenty miles to another crossin' an' no water. You pay or you don't cross. Better ask that good-lookin' short-horn heifer what she thinks of a waterless land. She's a good-lookin'——"

A living avalanche struck him and knocked him flat and stood over him with blazing eyes and face alight with the light of killing.

"One more word like that from you, Biggs, and I won't wait to pay our score. I'll kill you on sight. Understand me? Get up and go! Ah! You would, would you?"

Biggs's hand dropped to his holster, but Latigo seized the wrist and bent it back till the bone cracked. With a lightning twist he snatched the heavy six-gun from its holster and tossed it into the river and with a vigorous shove sent Biggs after it. He stood and watched the dripping man creep out of the yellow flood and climb on the flat boat where the two men stood watching him. For a long minute Latigo stood staring after him. Then he turned and rode back to camp.

"I'd better be the one to start it since it had to come to a call or a back-down," he muttered. "Anyhow he had worse 'n that comin' to him for talkin' of Miss Doris like that. I wonder why she's taken such a dislike to me."

CHAPTER XVI

THE RAINMAKER

WHEN Latigo caught up the buckboard, the chuck-wagon was already in sight and far behind that a cloud of red dust told of the oncoming herd. He signalled Baldy to stop the wagon; then he rode up to the buckboard and took a critical look at Andrew Opp.

He was a tall, sparely built man with a drooping, sad-looking moustache. A bedraggled black frock-coat split down the back from his recent exertions, a pair of trousers, once dove-colour, that had been added to by the grease and soot of many camps, a pair of patent-leather shoes whose toes turned up sneeringly, completed his attire, and a red bow-tie under his left ear gave it a touch of colour. He was talking volubly to Doris as the chuck-wagon drove up. After one frank look at Opp, Baldy Stone came over to listen. He had never seen anyone just like him before.

"It's true enough," he said. "That man Boggs made a contract with me to make rain for him. He said he'd pay me five hundred dollars. You know the way it is, I reckon. They pay five hundred dollars for a half-inch o' rain. He was to buy the supplies I'd need. They're due to git to Scalp Rock any day now. But the crazy fool got the idee all I have to do is to ask fer rain an' git it. Now, back East the preachers all pray fer rain. That's all right, too, but the Lord helps 'em that helps 'emselves. It's so, too, that when a man helps hisself he lightens up the

Lord's job. Sometimes the rain comes—if you pray jest right."

Baldy Stone snorted.

"No sense prayin' fer rain less'n the wind's right," he said. "Tell me this, stranger. Did you ever actually make any rain?"

"Who? Me? Sure I did. Why, the Mormons out in Seco Valley hadn't had no rain for three years. I sent up some charges o' dynamite in small balloons an' blowed the rain right out o' the sky. You got to be scientific to understand how it is. You see, the fools out there wasn't scientific. They said I was 'shootin' at God,' but all the same the rain come."

"After three years mebbe it was time, if it was comin' at all," muttered Baldy, *sotto voce*. "What was it you done over in Scalp Rock that made 'em run you out?"

"They wouldn't wait for the supplies. They made me use a lot of Indian ways," said Opp. "I seen there was only one way o' pacifyin' 'em, so I used the Chinook method."

"What's that?" demanded Doris breathlessly.

"Well, it's like this, miss. The medicine-man—that's me in this case—builds a skin lodge. I used a old canvas tent. Then he lays a big ring o' flat stones like the letter Q about six foot across an' builds a fire in the middle. There's twelve stones. He names one fer each month that has rain in it an' he pours a little b'ilin' water on each stone named fer a rain month. Then he adds a little powder—that's the real secret—and he makes a sacrifice, too, by pourin' some o' the b'ilin' water on the foot o' the person who wants the rain. You see, that's the personal sacrifice that he pays to the rain gods. The Chinooks say that's the reely important part of it. Of course it's hotter

'n hell an' it hurts some, but you can't make a omelet—'less'n you break eggs."

"Who was it that wanted the rain?" demanded Latigo, beginning to see the light.

"Boggs," said Opp. "I done tol' 'im it was necessary about the b'ilin' water an' it might not bring the rain after all. Them Chinooks ain't scientific no ways. Well, Boggs he wouldn't stand still so I—well—he kicked me an' cussed me so I *threwed* it on him. Then I run."

"By God," said Baldy, "if you'd *threwed* a kittle o' b'ilin' water on me I'd have killed you."

"He was aimin' to," said Opp. "He done his dam'-dest. After this is over I'm a-goin' to quit this rain-makin' job. Layin' on o' hands fer cancer was always my best hold, anyhow. There's more money in it. I tell you gentlemen one thing. If you kin, you'd better steer clear of Scalp Rock. It's onè pizen nest of stinkin' snakes. Le' me tell you.

"That man Boggs came down here two years ago from somewhere up north. An old Chink named Look Long had a store here then." Latigo nodded. "Well, Boggs seen the chance. This ford is the only crossin' fer twenty or thirty miles. All the herds cross here. It ain't navigable water so the Federal authority can't control it. Boggs an' his men bought up the land in a strip up an' down the river. It was dirt cheap and nobody seen what he was after till it was done. Then he up and built a ferry and charges ferryin' charges fer all herds crossin'. If they don't pay they got to drive three days up er downstream till they come to a crossin'."

"How about the ford?" demanded Tonkaway.

"If you kin drive a herd o' wax cattle through hell fire, you kin cross the ford," said Opp. "He's dug it out an'

laid a lot of barbed wire on the bottom. You'll plumb ruin any cattle in that ford. You got no way out. You got to ferry an' meet his demands or drive up er down."

"But the trail crossed right here. It's got the right of eminent domain," said Latigo sharply.

"Try to git it," said Opp laconically. "That man Boggs has been here fer two years. He's got Look Long under his thumb, too. The place is a gold mine."

Even Andrew Opp, who had been a week in Scalp Rock, could not tell all. He did not know that Sam Boggs was wanted under the name of Biggs for past offences. Boggs had built that place with the men who drifted to him! Hold-up men from all the South-west, men fired from passing herds, killers wanted by the police of Northern cities, gamblers whose trade had passed with the dying Old West—all drifted to him. There were fat pickings from strayed cattle, from calves born on the bed-grounds of passing herds. But the greatest part of Boggs's income came from Look Long's gambling-hell.

Boggs had demanded a half interest in that gambling-hell and old Look Long, knowing it was better to part with half than to lose all, grudgingly assented. The old Chinaman kept his bank-roll of twenty thousand dollars in gold buried in an old potato cellar. Boggs would long ago have taken it but for his men. He knew that if he took it he would have to divide it. Both Boggs and his men figured it was better to get a steady income from Look Long than to kill the goose that was laying a golden egg every time a herd passed north. If either Boggs or his men had taken that bank-roll the place would have closed.

A long dry season had started trouble. With the river low the herds could cross twenty-five miles below Scalp

Rock. If rain came and the river ran bank-full, all herds must cross at the ferry. Then some trusting person, who believed all he heard, suggested a rainmaker. The result was Andrew Opp, who had been driving his trade among the Kansas farmers.

Latigo listened absorbedly to Opp's recital. It was very certain that he must cross the herd here and now. Twelve thousand head of stock cannot be temporized with. There was no grass behind him. There was no water here except in the river. He could not get the herd down the steep banks to the water except by driving them straight ahead after they had watered. He could not drive twenty-five miles up or down river; already the cattle were thirst crazy. If Opp was right, if that man Boggs meant what he said, then to cross that herd he must fight. Tonkaway stared moodily at him.

"What'll you do, Latigo?" he asked.

"Cross, of course," said Latigo laconically.

Tonkaway eyed him grimly. He believed thoroughly in Latigo. He had seen him tested, but after all this was the supreme test. Opp was sure the men in Scalp Rock would fight. Had Latigo thoroughly considered that?

Latigo had considered it from every angle. If there was a fight some one would be hurt but—the herd must go through! The oldest tenet of the creed that he had learned on range and ranch and rodeo and round-up was, "Owner's interest first of all." That creed has sent many men to death by fire and flood and fight, but it remains the creed of the range. The herd must go through! He sat for a long time in silence, and Tonkaway, seeing that he was intent on his plans, let him alone. He wondered how that man Boggs felt about it.

Sam Boggs had troubles of his own. The fact that the

real Chris Boden knew him alarmed him thoroughly. The moment this new trail-boss should tell what he knew, pursuit would follow, and that pursuit would not stop north of Mexico. He knew that he must leave Scalp Rock at once. To leave Scalp Rock he must clean up on all his holdings and the best time was now.

What an ungodly mess the whole tangle was, he thought. When Lem Silas went south to Velarde some months before he had given Biggs all the details of the plot that John Lucas had worked out after Biggs left Drybone. It was all simple enough as Lucas and Biggs had talked it over. Chris Boden had either been killed or else had had disappeared. When Wes Duke was hurt in Drybone and made his will he left all to the absent Chris Boden.

Then it was that Lucas and Biggs decided to send Lem Silas, the worthless but good-looking nephew of John Lucas, to Velarde to get what cash he could under the pseudonym of Chris Boden. Lem knew that Biggs and his gang of Nighthawks had scared young Chris out of the Drybone country, but he did not know the most important part—that Chris Boden remembered any wrong like an Indian and that he revenged it like a whole tribe.

When Lem Silas, riding through Scalp Rock where Biggs had taken refuge, told all of the details of the plot, Biggs was openly sceptical. But now the whole thing was playing into his hands. Lem Silas was to pose as Chris Boden and was to try to marry Doris Kane and so get a half interest in the great Crutch J ranch. If he got it he would sell out his interest at once. He was to retain one-quarter for himself. The balance in cash was to go to John Lucas, Biggs, and a clerk who had deftly forged the papers of identification, will and codicil.

But that plan had failed. The unsuspected drought in the Far South had ruined all the plan. Old Tonkaway, to save the cattle of the Crutch J and his own ranch of the Lazy M, had to drive all stock north to fatten and sell. Even if the pretended Chris Boden could get his share of the place it would be nothing. There were no cattle and there would be no profit till the herd was sold.

Certainly the pretended Chris Boden could not marry a poor girl. He could not keep up the pretence for ever. The real Chris Boden might turn up. He was always taking that chance. Boggs realized that Lem Silas had done the only sensible thing. There was but one way to cash in big on this affair—to do as Lem said—make the outfit pay ferrying charges and then with all the men that he had, stampede the herd the first night after they had crossed. And Tonkaway had twenty-five thousand dollars in gold with him.

Boggs licked his lips at the thought. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, six thousand for the ferrying charges. His heart gave an extra jump as he realized that this was the time to clean up on Look Long's bank-roll. Then there were the cattle. Once that herd of twelve thousand head were scattered there would be bunches to be picked up and driven into the hills.

But, first of all, the real Chris Boden must be disposed of. At thought of him Boggs's heart sank. This trailboss was not the unformed boy who had testified against him. This was the tried and tested man. And a man who had a just cause for anger. Decidedly he must be removed.

That could be done after the herd was ferried across, when the outfit was scattered in stampede. After that they would get the money from the chuck-wagon and he

could get the bank-roll from old Look Long and head south. There was no doubt in his mind of that. He would head south and get across the Line before he could be headed off, and all would be well.

Wait! Another thought came to him. He could do better than that. He had not realized how much better till he saw Doris in the buckboard. Lem Silas could not or would not marry her. But that was no reason why she could not be used. If Doris were once in his hands he would be sure of payment from Tonkaway, her father. Tonkaway must be rich to drive twelve thousand head of stock along the trail. He would be glad enough to ransom his pretty daughter by paying cattle from his herd.

He must see Lem Silas and find out what he had to say. How did it happen that the fake Chris Boden had travelled in the same outfit with the real Chris Boden without knowing it?

He went to his house and sent word for two of his men. They came quickly, for Sam Boggs was not a man to trifle with. They had heard of his accident with the trail-boss of the new herd and they knew he would be dangerous.

Boggs was sitting at a table with a demijohn of whisky before him when Welch and Durant came in.

CHAPTER XVII

COUNCIL OF WAR

THE next half-hour was a stormy one. Durant, wise to all Boggs's crookedness, suspected every move. When Boggs told them plainly that Latigo refused to pay ferry charges, they immediately believed he had a deal with the new trail-boss. He could not convince them otherwise.

"Damn it all," Boggs roared. "I'll prove it to you. Durant, go an' git that new man, Boden, and bring Look Long, too. We got to use him in this deal."

"That's all right." Durant rose heavily and reached for the demijohn. "What about the girl that Welch says is with the outfit?"

"We'll get the herd across when they pay ferry charges, and if we kin lay hands on the girl, we'll be sure her old man'll come across. We can get her and hold her till the owner buys her loose."

"That's all right, but what about Carmelita?"

A silence fell. They all knew that Carmelita must be considered. Carmelita was a pretty Mexican woman who had drifted into Scalp Rock on a freighter's wagon from the South. Her good looks made Boggs hire her to run the big dance-hall in the rear of the saloon, where a half-dozen short-skirted, painted-faced women sold drinks on commission.

But Carmelita had ambitions. She did not intend to remain a half-servant. She knew that Boggs had plenty

of money and that he would have more. She loved, not the uncouth Boggs, but the roll that he had and the bigger roll that she knew he would have, and from time to time she showed it so plainly that no one could mistake it.

"Why don't you marry her, Sam?" queried Big Bill Durant. He was the only man who dared face Boggs. "You got to do it sometime. You may 's well do it now. She'll sure stick a knife in you if you don't. You could do worse."

But Boggs felt since he had seen Doris that he could do better. He had not realized how much better till he saw Doris sitting by Tonkaway in the buckboard. The sight of her struck him like a physical blow. Of course she was beyond his legitimate reach but—there were other ways. Of course she would not willingly marry him, but if he had her in his hands he could change her mind. Women, like cattle, were hard to drive, but Boggs could drive cattle.

Once that was done old Tonkaway, master of the Lazy M ranch, would be a gold mine for him. He studied the men before him, and his anger grew. They had seen his defeat at the hands of a smaller man. He feared for the loss of his prestige.

The door opened suddenly and Carmelita burst into the room. She stood glowering at Boggs, and her face was twisted with wrath. It was plain that she had heard of the encounter at the ferry.

"If you all had backed me up like men," said Boggs hotly, "we'd have put that trail-boss where he belongs. After Opp left we could have downed that man."

"Yeah, and had twenty crazy Texas punchers on our backs," Welch snarled. "If you hadn't been so set on admirin' that short-haired girl in the buckboard, you'd

have knowed better 'n to start trouble with a river at yore back after you'd told us to go to the ferry."

Carmelita flared into sudden rage.

"Thees—thees girl they spik of—you like her, Sam?"

"Oh, go to hell," said Boggs. "I didn't notice her. I didn't even see her hardly."

Welch nudged Durant in the ribs. But he spoke to Carmelita.

"Sure he liked her, Carmelita," he said. "You'd ought to've saw him. He had his eyes on'er all the time. She's a good-looker, too. It wouldn't surpris' me none if old Boggs here was to jine church an'—an' marry her."

A glass full of potent, bad whisky was flung full in his face as Boggs rose with an oath, but Carmelita seized him by both arms and forced him into a corner.

"*Oiga!*" she said. "Leeston, Sam Boggs. I work here one year! I run ze dance-hall. I boss ze girls. I do all ze dirty work you tell me to do. W'at fo'? W'at you tcenk I do eet fo'? Fi' dollar a week? Bah! You fool! *Buffoon! Ladrone!*" She snapped her thumb and forefinger in his face. "I tell you somezing. Sq long as Carmelita stay 'ere you not meex up wit' oder woman. *Sabe?*"

Followed a quick flash and glitter as she slipped a knife from her stocking. It was small enough to be ridiculous in any other hands, but Boggs had had one experience with that knife. He carried a long scar on the side of his neck that burned like fire at sight of the bared blade. He wrenched loose and threw Carmelita aside.

"Oh, sit down, you fool. Don't you see Welch is lyin'? Even if the girl was pretty she wasn't as pretty as you, Carmelita."

Carmelita stood over him like a snake over a toad while

Welch and Durant laughed openly. The knife came slowly down and was replaced as she glowered at him. She was a pretty woman, but hard drinking, hard living and the constant fear of hard dying had left indelible marks on her.

"Eet ees good you t'ink so. W'ere you go now?" For Boggs was heading for the door.

"I'm goin' over to Look Long's place. If those people are plannin' to try to cross that herd, they'll try it at daylight."

They rose swearing, and followed him to the end of the streets to Look Long's place. It was a big room with walls of split cottonwoods sunk vertically in the ground and roofed with logs and earth. A long bar filled the front of the room, and back of the bar were placed tables for stud poker. A Chinese policy game was in full blast. Look Long himself was wandering about the room with a wary eye on all players. Boggs nodded to him and shouted to the room in general.

"Just a minute, you fellers. I want a word with you."

Silence fell. Chin Lee, turning the wheel of the Chinese policy game, stopped it. Look Long slid through the crowd and listened, and Lem Silas—till now Chris Boden—sauntered forward, pushing through the crowd. They surged about Boggs as he stood with his back to the bar.

"You all know there's a big herd across the river," he said. "I saw the boss of the outfit an' he says he'll be damned if they pay any ferry charges. He aims to cross his herd. You know what that means. If one herd crosses at the ford it means that all others'll do the same thing. Rain'll stop the ford, but we ain't got no chance of any rain as far as I kin see. The question is, are you

all a-goin' to let that herd cross after the work we done on the ferry? If you'll back my play we'll stop that crossin'."

There was no question of their willingness to back him. Those men, offscourings of mines and ranches, their jobs gone and no chance of being employed in civilization, were always willing to take a chance. They had followed Boggs here to Scalp Rock and had made money by carrying out his orders. Rustled cattle, stolen cattle, stripped hides, calves born on the bed-grounds and left too weak to travel, salted mines on occasion—a score of avenues were open to them.

Now if this herd of twelve thousand head was at the ford they could make a mint of money. It might be the last, for they knew well that such a play as Boggs would make with such a big venture meant that they must leave. They could not stay at Scalp Rock after this. But they wanted to find out just what Boggs proposed. Lassiter voiced his curiosity.

"What you aimin' to do, Boggs?" he demanded. "I ain't swallerin' a mouthful till I've bit it off. I ain't aimin' to spend the rest o' my life dodgin' the marshal or the sheriff. We got a bad enough name as it is. Spill the beans."

"You, Boden—Chris Boden!"

Boggs turned to Lem Silas who leaned against the bar. No one in all Scalp Rock knew him but Boggs and they all eyed his big figure as he edged forward. Look Long's eyes nearly popped from his head. He started to speak but shut his mouth suddenly with a snap and his eyes never left the recent Chris Boden.

"Tell 'em what you know of the herd," snapped Boggs. But before Lem Silas could speak Boggs went on.

"You all don't know this man but I do. I've knowed him for ten years. Him and me's worked together before I came down here. You can bank on what he tells you. I vouch fer him."

"That's all right, Sam. What I want to know is—who's goin' to vouch fer you?"

At the roar of laughter that rose, Boggs turned white. Quick to take offence, he dared not do it now. This one deal must be put through as he had planned it.

"Tell 'm, Boden," he said.

"I was trail-boss for the outfit," said Boden. "I quit yesterday. I quit when I found my old friend Boggs had a better thing in sight. They've got twelve thousand head of stock and twenty-five thousand dollars in cash on the wagon. If you know better pickin's than that, go to it."

"Chew on that fer a bit," shouted Boggs.

They chewed on it for a long five minutes, wrangling over tin cups of liquor that nearly strangled them. The lamps burned dimly in the smoke fog.

"What you want to do, Boggs?" demanded Burch suddenly. "We'll back your play. How many men've they got with the outfit?" he demanded gruffly.

"The trail-boss, the big boss and his daughter and twenty-three men," said Silas.

"Will they fight?"

"Sure they'll fight—if they get a chance. Your best bet is to get 'em when they can't fight."

"What kind of a trail-boss have they got?"

"From what Boggs tells me he's a new man. His name is——"

Then Boggs spilled the beans.

"His name is Chris Boden," he said sharply. "You damned fool, you gummed the whole game from the

beginnin'. The man is the real Chris Boden. He's flim-flammed you from the first!"

Lem Silas crossed the room in a jump and seized Boggs by the arm.

"Give up," he said curtly. "What you tellin' me?"

"I'm tellin' you the truth," said Boggs. "Didn't I use to work up at Butte? Didn't I know you and your uncle there? Didn't we work the train racket there? Didn't I land up to my neck in trouble by the testimony of that damned man Boden an' his son? Didn't I know the boy? He was only a kid then and he left right after the fuss. But he knowed about old man Boden bein' shot to death. He's got enough under his hat to send me to——" Boggs sweated gently and wiped his face with his hand. "I tell you, he's the real Chris Boden," he said. "How come you didn't know it?"

"How would I know it? He never told me his name till after I told him I was Chris Boden. Then he just laid low and watched, I suppose."

Boggs swore again.

"You've gummed things up entire," he said. "The man must know now that you're over here. You couldn't be anywhere else. He knew me the minute he saw me. He's got your job as trail-boss and I know enough of him to know he's a fighter. He'll try to take that herd through."

Look Long listened carefully. His eyes centred on Lem Silas. They settled on him the moment Boggs called him Chris Boden. He knew the real Chris Boden well. His mind bridged the gap of years and he remembered well how the real Chris Boden had helped him when he needed help, when two men had held him up and were about to rob him. From what Boggs and his man Lem Silas said

the real Chris Boden was with that herd across the river. He listened eagerly to Boggs as he outlined his plans.

"Are we goin' to let 'em pass that herd without payin' toll?" demanded Boggs finally.

The answer came in a growl that delighted him.

"Four bits a head," said Betts. "By God, if he tries to cross we'll take it outen his hide. Who's that?"

The door flung open and a man pitched into the room.

"You all better look to you shocin'," he shouted. "They're crossin' the herd."

The place went wild.

CHAPTER XVIII

STAMPEDE

LATIGO foresaw trouble. He knew Sim Biggs's or Boggs's—or whatever he chose to call himself—threats were not empty. But he would not pay that damned thief and murderer any ferry charges. Of course if he used the ferry he would pay, but neither Boggs nor any man could compel him to ferry twelve thousand cattle when he could swim them, or ford. He would only fight Boggs as a last resort.

It was not fair to go to Tonkaway for advice. Tonkaway had a much more valuable charge than the herd. He had Doris to look out for. This was his job. He set his teeth and he realized that this was his test. Not to keep a job. He could always make his own way. And he did not care especially for the bequest that his uncle had left. He did care particularly for what Doris might think of him.

"Doggone it," he muttered. "She liked me a little bit at first. I wonder what I did to queer myself."

In his own desire to find out what the pretended Chris Boden wanted he forgot that a girl might take a different view.

From the very first sight he had of Doris his heart had gone out to her. She was the apotheosis of all that was best in the West, and he had wandered over many trails. He had seen little frontier towns red with the blaze of six-guns. He had seen mining-camps in the grip of civil

war. He had ridden through the insurrection-ruined Sonora and he loved this land where he had come at last.

"Time to spread my blankets, I reckon," he thought from time to time, "but doggone it! Now that I've found out how much I want her, she looks at me like I'm the torn deuce in a dirty pack."

This was no time to spend on his private troubles. That herd must cross, and he must do it at once. He meant to cross in spite of hell and high water. He sought Opp, but Opp was not cheering.

"Of course there's the ford," he said. "But they've ruined the ford. They've filled it up with broken glass and barbed wire fastened to stakes. You'll plumb ruin every cow you let enter the ford." He pointed to Scalp Rock, which lay like a flat, black lozenge on the water. "The ford's above that rock. It's too deep for fordin'. Them high banks reach for miles. If man or cow or horse is swept offen his feet he'll go down for miles and he's bound to—you got to swim, I tell you. If you kin swim 'em right here, you kin make it, but if they're driven back or down stream you can't make it."

"How many men has this man Boggs really got?"

"Every damned man in Scalp Rock an' near it," said Opps bitterly. "He kin gather in about eighty men if he gits 'em all. I tell you fair you'd better pay an' ferry. If you ain't got the cash they'll take it in cattle. I know 'em. I've scen 'em before. I've seen Boggs trail herds north that he never bought. Why do you reckon he's so damned anxious for rain?"

"I don't know," said Latigo. "Why does he want it?"

"With that river runnin' bank-full, this ferry is the only crossin' fer miles. When my rain comes——"

"Good Lord," snapped old Baldy. "How much rain

do you all own, stranger? If you all start a rainstorm and make this mess any worse 'n it is right now I'll scalp you right back to yore ears."

"Is 'at so?" Opp ruffled like an angry cockatoo. "I'll start a rainstorm any old time I choose. This here land'd be a good place if it had a little rain. It's too damn dry."

"That's all that ails hell," said Baldy. "They got good society there."

He turned away to the chuck-wagon, where Doris stood laughing, and old Tonkaway turned to his trail-boss.

"How'll you do it, Latigo?"

"Throw four or five men across with rifles to hold the crossin'. Then I'll swim the cattle in small bunches and hold the leaders below the bank till a lot have crossed. It's the only way."

The grim-faced Tonkaway, always ready for a fight or a frolic, and worried now only for Doris, knew it was true. It was the only way.

When the outfit gathered for supper, Latigo sprung his plan. It met instant approval, and even Opp sided up to Tonkaway.

"You all got a gun you kin lend me, Mr Kane?" he asked.

"Hello, Professor! You, too? Kin you shoot?"

"They busted their contract with me," said Opp hotly. "They ain't paid me the money and they've got all my supplies by this time. They come in on a freighter's wagon this mornin' and they're all in Look Long's corral. You give me a shotgun and load her up with a handful o' nails. I'll sure make the seat o' Sam Boggs's pants look like it's had smallpox."

"I want four men to cross ahead of the herd," said

Latigo quietly. "Any man willin' to go hold up his hand."

Nineteen hands shot high in the air. Four men were with the herd.

"All right, boys. Thanks. Baker, Burt, Dent, and White, I want you to get to the far side as quietly as you can. When you get across, get to the top of the bank. Keep quiet as long as you can, but if anybody tries to interfere with the swimmin' of the herd, shoot and shoot to kill. They'll be lookin' for us about sun-up. We'll start just as soon as it's good and dark."

"Huh!" Tonkaway grunted. "It'll be hell to swim in the dark."

"I know it." Latigo grinned. "A man can't swim a herd and stay a church member. Wait a bit."

The four men selected to cross sat by the fire with their guns across their knees. From Scalp Rock across the swirling river came shouts and yells and an occasional shot. Latigo finally rose.

"All right, boys," he said quietly. "Let's go."

The four men swung into saddle and headed for the cut above the ferry that led to the shore. Baldy hunched up in the seat of the chuck-wagon and Doris climbed to the buckboard seat by Tonkaway. They were to wait till the herd had crossed.

"Strike a match and show it behind your hat when you're in position," cautioned Latigo to White. He nodded.

With scarcely a sound the four horses entered the water. Two yards from the bank they were swimming, but the deep channel was narrow. A few minutes later Latigo, listening eagerly, heard the horses snort as they waded out on the far shore. Then a faint spark of light

well up on the bank gave the signal for the crossing. All was well so far.

"All right. Shove 'em down, boys! Don't let 'em rush the bank. As quietly as you can now."

It could not be done in silence. Roused in the cold dark from the bed-grounds, the great steers blundered off into the night, their eyes shining like luminous discs. Stragglers were shouldered back into the press, and the first small bunch scuttered down the slope, checked at the water, and was forced into the stream by the weight of the mass behind.

"Keep 'em goin'! Two men ride down to head 'em from swimmin' downstream. Don't let 'em get headed downstream. If they do, they're goners."

About a hundred got safely across. The rest were milling about on the flat, resenting the quick rush of the ponies, cutting out bunch after bunch, when a sudden burst of flame spat out into the night and a flat smacking report came across the water. Instantly pandemonium broke loose. Shot after shot rang out and lines of sparks stabbed the dark. Yells and shouts rose on the night wind. Then a dozen crazy steers on the bank-edge threw up their heads and bellowed. It was answered from the river, where a big bunch of cold and half-drowned steers fought like devils for very life. And above them Scalp Rock rushed to the ford.

Those four men could not stem that rush. The alarm brought out every man in Scalp Rock, and a drink-maddened crowd followed Boggs to the ferry. They reached the bank in time to hear the quick rush of the first bunch through the shallow water. A quick shot sent the leading steer to his knees and drove three others in headlong flight. A shot from White dropped the shooter

with a bullet through his leg. Then a volley answered the flash from White's rifle.

Instantly the night was one long crackle of rifle-fire. Then came worse than that! Shooting would not stop that herd, but fire would! Old bed-clothes, papers, anything that would blaze was soaked in oil, lighted and flung over the bank edge into the half-crazy herd.

The leading steers instantly bolted. In spite of all Latigo and his men could do the head of that herd turned on itself. The six-guns that spat fire in their faces could not hold them, and they came back across the stream in a crazy mass that trampled all in its path. Some, caught in the current and swept down stream went to certain death below the ferry.

The attempt had failed. Latigo knew it when the rear-guard of the crossing party blundered up the bank to throw themselves in the very face of the milling herd that had not crossed.

"Hold 'em, men! Hold 'em! They'll stampede clear to Mexico if they once start again."

But it was too much for that herd. Fire, shouting, cold water, and the shooting in their faces made them wheel and break and run. And that stampede was directed straight for the chuck-wagon, behind which was the buckboard in which sat Tonkaway with Doris.

Tonkaway Kane had the eyes of a cat. Also he had a cattleman's sixth sense that told him what to look for. He had feared this from the beginning, but Latigo was right. It was the only thing to do. He felt and smelt rather than saw the herd run and the full thunder of the stampede made the earth tremble. To be caught in the face of that crazy mass was certain death, and he had Doris to look to. The minute his quick ears told him

what had happened he grabbed the reins and the whip and 'poured leather' into the startled ponies.

Old Baldy Stone, too, caught the fever, and buckboard and chuck-wagon tore across the face of the flying mass. Safety lay a half-mile to the west.

That prairie was no smooth mesa. It was full of chuck-holes and mesquite stubs left when the denizens of Scalp Rock hunted for fuel. The heavy chuck-wagon crashed through everything, but the buckboard, swaying and rocketing to the stride of the frenzied ponies, lurched sickeningly.

"Hang on, little daughter! Hang on good!" Tonkaway's voice rose above the roar.

Doris nodded silently and hung on for dear life. The next moment it happened. The off front wheel of the buckboard ran up a prairie-dog mound, struck a rock and dropped with a crash to solid ground. Tonkaway catapulted out on his face and was dragged along by his wrists, for he had thrust both hands through the loops.

Doris gave a sharp cry and snatched at the reins but missed. Then the reins parted and the frantic girl, clinging with both hands to the low seat-rail, was dashed from side to side as the frenzied ponies caught their full stride and, freed of Tonkaway's weight upon the bits, stretched out in full gallop.

No one saw it. No man could attend to anything but his own business, and just then Doris was distinctly Tonkaway's business. The business of those scattered men was to head the flying herd, to close in the stragglers and to let them run till exhaustion stopped them. The cattle were heavy with grass and water and would not run far. But the damage was done.

It was a long five hours before the swearing men got

the cattle rounded up and headed for their old campground. A few had dropped out and a few had been killed in the rush, but in the main little damage had been done.

Latigo rode up to Stevens and caught him between cigarettes.

"Seen old Tonkaway and Doris?" he asked.

"Nope. They were in the buckboard by the chuck-wagon last time I saw 'em. Old Tonkaway'll turn up in his own good time."

But he did not, and it was old Baldy Stone who found him unconscious a half mile out on the prairie. Baldy managed to get him in the wagon and headed back for the old camp site. The broken reins on old Tonkaway's wrists told what had happened. When Baldy saw Latigo sitting his horse in the middle of an angry group he headed for them. White and Dent and Baker were there, too, and they were furiously angry.

"I tell you I ain't mistaken," said White with a vitriolic oath. "I seen him. Shorty Burt was lyin' behind the bank. He wasn't shootin'. 'Cause why? His gun was jammed! I tell you I seen the man commit cold murder. I seen that man that Latigo called Boggs an' that jasper that was our old trail-boss—the man who traded under yore name, Latigo. Yeah, I mean Chris Boden. I tell you the two of 'em rode over Shorty while his gun was jammed. The man Boggs jumped his horse on him an' that man Boden fired two shots into him. By God! I'll have his life fer that. He shot Shorty in the back."

Latigo's face darkened. He would have full payment for that. This Chris Boden who had stolen his name was building up an account that he must some day pay.

"The damned land-pirates," said Baker hotly. "Do

they think they kin get away with road agents' work like this? Hello, Baldy," he hailed suddenly. "Got back, huh?"

"Yep. I got Tonkaway, too," quoth Baldy. "I found him knocked endways out on the prairie. The team must have run away, and the reins busted an'——"

"But where's Doris?" demanded Latigo hotly. "She was with 'Tonkaway in the buckboard. Where is she?"

"That's why I turned back," said Baldy quickly. This time there was concern in his voice. "She's in the buckboard, Latigo, behind them stampeded crazed ponies with the reins busted. Doris's gone, Latigo."

"Good Lord," said Latigo. "Come on. We've got to find her. This is worse than all."

CHAPTER XIX

DORIS

DORIS was never quite certain what happened that night; events were too cataclysmic. When Tonkaway was thrown from his seat she had a fleeting vision of his being dragged along by his face over rough hillocks studded with mesquite scrub and prickly pear and cholla. Then the reins broke and the team broke away into the night.

Heads low, bellies to earth, the half-broken ponies ran like scared coyotes. Doris, jerked from side to side, managed to keep her seat. The flying team crossed the another mile. Then they slacked, jolted, jarred and finally stopped and stood with drooping heads and heaving flanks.

Shaken beyond any semblance of self-control, frantic over the accident to her father, Doris got out. With the forethought of a range-bred girl she linked near and off horses, tied them to a mesquite bush and set to work to overhaul the broken harness. The reins, broken in half, were useless. Then she found a box of matches and a candle-end under the seat and set to work to repair damages.

The soft, slurring shuffle of shod hoofs well to her front made her look up quickly. Two dark figures bulked against the skyline and a voice boomed out of the night.

"What's the matter here? Somebody hurt?"

She knew the voices of the men of the Crutch J and the Lazy M. This was not the voice of any man she

"new. She held the flickering candle high and looked sharply at her questioner.

"My name's Wentworth, miss," said a voice. "I'm on my way to Scalp Rock."

She scanned him in a quick camera-like glance that took in everything—face as white as chalk, black, beady eyes like shoe-buttons stuck in a dumpling, drooping black moustache and a broken nose that spoke volumes.

"Our herd stampeded," she said briefly. "My father and I were trying to drive across the front of the herd and got caught. He was thrown out of the buckboard a piece back there. If you'll help me find him, I'll see you're well paid."

"Sure, we'll help you, miss. Gi' me them horses."

They tied their horses to the buckboard and set to work with a lariat to piece the broken reins.

"We was wonderin' what all the shootin' was about," said Wentworth. "Then Eames says to me, 'Let's go see,' he says. So we came."

"I'm glad you did," said Doris briefly. "We've had some trouble."

She gave them a brief account of what happened at the crossing. Both men listened attentively as though it was news to them. As a matter of fact, they knew more of it than she did. The two men, Wentworth and Eames, sent by Boggs to spot the progress of the stampede, had been riding well out on the western flank when they saw the lights of Doris's candle.

"Your father own this new outfit, miss?"

"Yes," said Doris, breathlessly. "He's part owner. We have five herds in the outfit. Over twelve thousand head."

"Good Lord, miss. Is the South all comin' north?"



"No. It's the drought. We had to move. We had no water. We've been buying more cattle on the way north."

"I see. Eames, give a hand here." Wentworth bent over his work while Doris searched for another candle.

"Plain luck," said Wentworth. "It's ham b'iled in champagne."

"What? What you talkin' about?" demanded Eames.

"This is the girl that man Boden's been telling about in Scalp Rock. This is the girl that made Carmelita mad. She's the daughter of the owner. That man Kane! And old Kane's got cash with him. Don't you see, you fool? This girl's worth cash to us."

"What'll we do with her?"

"Do? You fool. We'll tie our horses to the buckboard an—wait—I'll show you. Here, miss!" He turned to Doris. "We better back track and find your father where he was chucked out. He may be hurt. Climb in the back seat. I'll do the drivin'."

She climbed in and her heart sank as she remembered her last sight of her father. It was not possible for a man to be dragged as he was being dragged without being seriously hurt. Eames jumped in beside her and Wentworth urged the ponies to a trot. For ten minutes no one said anything. Finally:

"This is not the way I came," said Doris sharply. "The team ran along the ridge there. We're travelling down the slope to the river-bank."

"Grab her, Eames," snarled Wentworth over his shoulder. "You know too darned much fer a girl," he growled. "Shut up, you little fool! It can't help you none to yell. There's no one to hear you."

Wentworth shot the words over his shoulder and

instantly Eames seized her. She struggled wildly in his grasp, but his iron grip held her arms to her sides. She screamed at the top of her voice, but Eames laughed.

"If they kin hear that miles off where they are, they'll be goin' some," he said.

"My—my father——"

"Oh, damin your father. All he's good for is to pay us fer you, Miss Pretty. You're too good-lookin' a piece to be travellin' with a herd. I reckon you'll be worth ten thousand cash er cattle."

Wentworth turned in his seat and snarled viciously.

"If she don't shut up, muzzle her," he said. "Stuff a rag in her mouth."

A thunderbolt striking the team itself could not have alarmed her more. These men must be the very men who had caused the stampede. She was in their power, and her father might be dead. She was helpless. Eames's grip could not be broken. His words recurred to her! Cash or cattle! They meant to hold her for ransom! To make her father pay. But—where was her father?

"I'll be quiet if you'll hunt for my father," she said frantically. "If you'll find him and help him I'll do what you say. He'll pay anything in reason."

"Huh!" Wentworth snorted. "I got four aces right now. I won't argue with him. He'll pay, if he wants to git you back. Shut up."

"Don't you see," she insisted. "If my father has been killed there's no one to pay you."

"There's the trail-boss in charge of the herd."

"He can't give you what he hasn't got. He has no money."

"He's got cattle and we kin dicker in cattle, I reckon. Drive on, Pete."

There was no help for it. She clung with one little hand to the seat-rail while Eames still held her in a vice-like grip that he dared not relax. He knew she would jump out if she got the chance, and once afoot in the darkness she could easily escape.

They rattled down the bank to the ferry crossing and the great flat boat seemed to leap at them out of the shadow. Four men came forward without a word. Wentworth urged the team on to the boat and Eames climbed out, dragging her after him.

"All right, Ross" he said. "Shove off. Where's Boggs?"

"In Scalp Rock. He's liquored up by now, I reckon. Him an' that man Silas. Who you got there?"

"Princess of the Royal Blood," snickered Eames. "This here's the daughter o' the owner of the herds. Reckon she's our ace right now."

Welch was one of those four men. He had seen Doris in the buckboard when Opp escaped, and he laughed frankly.

"Huh. The short-haired heifer that Sam Boggs was admirin'. I'm bettin' old Sam'll be plumb glad to see her. So will Carmelita, I bet. You kin look fer fireworks when that Mexican woman sees this 'un."

The men nudged each other appreciatively as the great boat swung off into the current.

"All off fer Scalp Rock."

Eames jerked her to her feet and almost threw her into the buckboard, and the team moved up the steep approach.

The place was ablaze with lights. Shouting men staggered from one saloon to another accompanied by the scantily dressed women from the dance-halls. Bottles of

liquor passed from hand to hand, and an occasional shot and drunken whoop told that Scalp Rock was wide awake.

A dozen half-drunken men surrounded the buckboard as it stopped by Boggs's saloon, and Doris shrank back from their eager gaze. Drunken men were no novelty to her, but she had never even dreamed of such surroundings. The crowd suddenly split and Sam Boggs stood in the full glare of the smoky lamps in the saloon door. For a moment he could not believe his eyes. Eames enlightened him.

"You never counted on a piece of luck like this, Sam," he said. "This is the daughter of the man who owns the herd."

"Bring her in," said Boggs hoarsely. "She's just what I want. Bring her in. Into the back room, Jim."

Herded like an animal, crowded between the jostling groups of drunken, swearing, sweating men, Doris walked bravely across the floor. There was an indefinable something in her air that compelled a certain respect. Too, it may be that those men knew well a terrible revenge would be demanded if she were mistreated.

Boggs chuckled openly. In his wildest dreams he had never imagined such a piece of luck. With Doris in his hands he could demand what payment he chose. And Chris Boden—the real Chris Boden—would be humbled utterly. With Doris in his hands he could make any demand he chose of this man Boden whose word could send him to jail for years. He flung open the door of the room behind the bar and let Doris pass. He followed her into the room and slammed shut the door in the faces of his men.

"Sit down," he growled. "I aim to talk to you so you'll *sabe* me."

She was as cold as chilled steel as she faced her captor. She was in this beast's power, but she did not fear him in the least. A hidden strength lent stiffness to her moral fibre as she faced him.

"You'll pay dearly for this," she said hotly. "Wait till our men cross."

"Wait till they do. Hell'll be froze over long 'fore that. Now you listen to me. I didn't know you'd fall into my hands, but now you're here I'm sure goin' to use you."

He went to the littered table and took from its drawer a sheet of paper and a pencil that he thrust before her.

"Write," he said. "Write to your father or to that damned trail-boss o' his'n. I mean Chris Boden. Oh, I know him all right. An' I sure aim to take it outen his hide this trip. He'll come damned near to doin' what I say this time. You kin tell 'em it'll cost 'em ten thousand dollars in gold or a thousand steers."

He wheeled suddenly upon her at a sudden thought. Why should he not get *all*? This pretty girl who had never seen anything like Scalp Rock before in her life could be counted upon to purchase her safety at any price. Why not make his future sure? If he could make her marry him, old Tonkaway, if he was still living, would be muzzled effectually, and Boden, whom he feared, would be helpless.

"You got any objection to marryin' me?" he asked.

"You! You crazy, filthy beast! Wnat's your name? Biggs, isn't it?"

He flamed into instant wrath. 'So Boden had told her who he was!

"My name's Boggs," he said curtly. "Don't make no mistake about it. It's goin' to be yours, too, before you git away from here. After you've been kep' in my house

a few days you'll be glad to stand up in front of a priest with anyone who asks you, I reckon. You write that letter. I'll learn you to mind me like a dog before I'm done with you. Write that letter. I'll find a man to carry it."

But that last was not easy and Boggs knew it. Any man from Scalp Rock falling into the hands of the irate Crutch J and Lazy M outfit would have short shrift. There was but one man in all Scalp Rock whom they could send and that man was Look Long. He would send Look Long.

When Doris had written her note, Boggs went to the door and called Welch.

"You give this letter to Look Long at once," he said, "and tell him I say he's to take it across the river right away and find the boss of that outfit and give him the note. If Look Long don't bring back a receipt for the letter, I'll burn his whole damned place. Make him *sabe* that, Welch. I know where he keeps his bank-roll and I'll have that too. You go with the Chink to the ferry an' see that he takes the letter. Now what the hell is up?"

A sudden babble of shrill voices swelled into a riot in the bar as a prolonged burst of blows on the door threatened to break it from its hinges. The next moment it was flung open and a group of angry men headed by Carmelita forced their way into the room.

CHAPTER XX

CARMELITA'S PRISONER

CARMELITA was furiously angry. She had seen Doris being hustled into the back room, she remembered every word that had been told her of how Sam Boggs admired the girl, and she was sure that Boggs in some way was double-crossing her. Just how, she did not know, and that made it worse. As she passed through the saloon she gathered a dozen men.

"You! Buffoons! Fools! Idiots!" she shouted. "You know Pantano—Boggs." That was as near as Spanish could come to his name. "He got ze girl wit' 'im!"

"Oh, cut it out, Carmelita!" Wentworth vainly tried to stop her. "That girl's the daughter of the man who owns the herd across the river. Sam's tryin' to hold the old man up fer cash fer us all. He figgers he kin git a lot extra fer the girl, too. You'll git your share of that. Shut up, you spittin' hell-cat."

"Si. Yes. Pantano get ze money. Who gets it from Pantano? Tell me that. How mooch money you teenk zat girl wort' when she been wit' Boggs overnight? Heh? You fools! He fool you again like he did before."

They stood like fools staring at each other. That was true. They could not trust Boggs. She burst into volcanic speech again.

"You fools! You *ratons*! You have not ze sense of ze burros! You teenk he share his money wit' you? Not

one *peso*, I tell you! I know him! He take eet all an' rob you an' me, too, I tell you!"

Whatever were Carmelita's faults, she did not lie unless on some worthy occasion. And she did know Boggs. They knew that she told the truth. If Boggs got a chance he would certainly double-cross them. Five men demanded immediate explanation—and got it.

"Eef zat girl ees in ze room wit' Sam Boggs. You know heem! Her *padre* owns ze herd. Eef she ess wit' Sam Boggs, who gets her money? Huh. *You tell me!* Suppose she marry wit' heem an' he make her marry him if he get a chance. Eef she *not* marry heem, nobody pay for her after she been wit' Sam Boggs. She wort' nothing zen. Will any man pay ten thousand dollars for what Sam Boggs leaves?"

"By God! She's right!" said Fortin with a crackling oath. "Bust that door down, fellers! That girl belongs to all of us."

The door went down in a wild rush of angry men, and Boggs, angry though he was, knew he must temporize. An undertone of sullen growls answered him.

"By God, you done nothin'," said Gray. "All you done was to ride down that one pore puncher on the river-bank while yore buddy, that man named Silas er Boden er whatever his name is, shot him in the back."

Doris's heart almost missed a beat. Some one had been killed in the Lazy M outfit. Could it have been Boden? Could it have been the new trail-boss? She felt her heart almost stop beating. She almost suffocated in her wild desire to speak. Wentworth went on:

"That liar Boggs told us we'd be rich in a year. So we would but for that cursed Chinese policy game that pays fifty per cent. to Look Long an' fifty per cent. to Boggs.

That girl safe and sound is worth ten thousand dollars to us all. After Sam Boggs has had her, she won't be worth a curse. Carmelita's right."

Eames spoke up.

"She belongs to us all," he said. "And we'll keep her, too. You do not have her, Boggs."

"Neither do you." Boggs flashed a knife but sheathed it instantly. "We can't afford to fight and you know it."

"Let Carmelita look after her," said Eames with a laugh. "Carmelita'll love her. She loves you, Sam. Carmelita'll see that nobody kin double-cross you."

A dozen men took it up with laughing approval, and Boggs did not dare dissent. He intended to have Doris for his own property; legally if he could; illegally if he must; but he could not afford to quarrel now. If he could make her marry him it would give him a hold over her father—if he had not been killed. Failing that, he meant to get the ransom money in his own hands, to get the twenty thousand dollars from Look Long and make a quick run for the Mexican border. He was sure the Crutch would pay for Doris in cash. If they paid in cattle he would have to forfeit his share. That made it more necessary than ever to get the cash from Look Long.

Where did Look Long hide his roll? He kept it in gold because he needed gold for every drawing of his lottery-wheel. Later he would see about that money. Just now he must placate these angry men.

"Sure, let Carmelita take her," he said briefly. "Listen here." He drew the angry Carmelita aside. "You know what this girl means to us," he said swiftly, in a low tone. "She's worth ten thousand dollars, Carmelita. You keep an eye on her every move. See she don't get away. Better lock her up in the Bird Cage."

"Me?" Carmelita had a sudden thought. "I know w'ere I put 'er."

"Where?"

"Nevair min'. More better you not know." She grinned at him.

"*Bueno!* An' say, Carmelita. There's no use tellin' the men where you'll keep the girl. When that money is paid fer her it'll be just enough fer you an' me."

Carmelita scanned him from head to foot. Then she turned to Doris.

"You come wit' me," she said.

Doris made a quick dash for the door, but a man slipped behind her, seized her by both wrists, and jerked her hands behind her back. Before she could resist, he had both her hands tied with a huge handkerchief.

"Here, Carmelita." He chuckled gleefully. "Here's your new girl. I reckon you kin handle her now."

"Me? I could handle her before. Come wit' me, you leetle fool."

Her grip, as light as silk but as close as steel, forced the struggling Doris towards the door.

"Eef you wish two men to carry you, all right," said Carmelita viciously. "Eef you not weesh to be carried, more better you walk."

There was no help for it. She walked.

When the two girls left the room the men staggered back to the bar for the more serious business of drinking, and Boggs was left alone. He was intent on one problem. How could he find that bank-roll of Look Long's? The door flung suddenly open and Lem Silas, half drunk, swaggeringly dominant, burst into the room.

"Oh, here you are!" he snarled almost into Boggs's face. "I been lookin' for you. You fool! You utterly

complete an' perfect damned fool. You've ruined the whole plan I built up. The plan that couldn't fail if you'd had the sense that God gave a gopher."

Boggs's hand dropped slowly to his gun and he glared at Silas as at a hated spectre.

"Up at Butte you kicked over the traces," he said curtly. "You run me out o' there by yore plans to do too much. Now you've done it again. You've been drunk ever since you got here and now you got the nerve to tell me——"

"Listen to me!" Silas whirled him about to the bar. "Don't you see what you've done? I told you that wagon's got twenty-five thousand dollars in gold in it. I told you they had twelve thousand cattle. I told you to let 'em cross. If you'd let 'em cross and then jumped 'em with all your men, you could have taken the wagon with the cash, your men could have driven off the cattle into the hills, and you might have got your hands on the girl and made her father kick in a big price for her. What've you done? You stampeded the herd before it crossed. The wagon got away with the cash. The cattle are all south of the river where you can't get a head without fightin' with those crazy Texas waddies. The man we've both've got reason to be afraid of—the real Chris Boden—is with 'em. How long will it be till he sets the law after us? How long can we last here? You know the answer. Just as soon as that man Boden can get to a telegraph office the Federal officials'll be on our trail. You damned fool!"

Boggs stared at him. Every word was true. He had been so intent on stopping that crossing that he had overlooked more important things. Silas was dead right! He must get away at once. Before Boden had time to 'blow'

on him! He knew those men of the Lazy M and the Crutch J would be busy for two days gathering up loose cattle. In that time he could clean up.

"There's the Chink, Look Long," said Silas quickly. "How much cash does he handle to run his games?"

"Twenty thousand at least." Boggs sweated gently and it ran down his face in little streams. "Look here, Silas. Maybe I did act too derved quick. But we got the girl, Silas. We got her, I tell you."

"You did? Where is she?"

"Carmelita's got her locked up somewhere. I don't know where."

Silas continued to stare at him. He did not want to face Doris. He had still a little pride, and to face the girl after he had been guilty of such treachery was too much even for him. "How about this Chink, Look Long?" he said again.

"Listen!" Boggs shoved a bottle across the bar. "We, you an' me, can do two things, Silas. We kin get that cash from Look Long and swipe that an' the girl. She ought to be good for the cash on the wagon. If we can approach 'em. Anyhow, we can get the twenty thousand from Look Long."

"Where does he keep it?"

"I don't know. We'll have to find out."

"That's easy. Listen!" Silas spoke quickly and tensely and Boggs listened eagerly. Then he set to work.

He got a small canvas sack from a closet. Then he hunted around in that closet till he found a box of iron washers that he emptied into the sack.

"Now," he passed the open sack to Silas, "what's the rest of it?"

Silas thrust across the table a handful of ten-dollar gold

pieces and whispered again and Boggs's face broke into a grin.

"You've hit it," he said grimly. "If that don't show us where the gold cache is I miss my guess."

He went to the door and shouted for a drink. It was brought hurriedly by a Mexican boy.

"Here, Pepe," said Boggs quickly. "Run over to Look Long's place an' tell Chin Lee to come quick. *Sabe?*"

Pepe nodded and departed, and the two men sat and drank till the soft shuffle of rope sandals told them Chin Lee was coming. He was a young Chinaman who had been long with Look Long. He presided over the drawings of the policy game, made out the tickets, and was a general utility man about the gambling-hell. Look Long trusted him as he trusted no other human being. As he entered the room Boggs was engaged in counting the gold pieces that Silas had given him. He grinned at Chin Lee.

"Hello, Lee. Look here. I've got a lot more money for the drawing to-night. We'll play for a big prize to-night, Chin. I've got two thousand dollars more here." He raked the last of the gold pieces into the bag, tied it with a piece of thong and, taking a huge piece of red sealing-wax, set to work to seal the bag. He fixed five big blobs of wax on the bag, stamped it with a wet thumb and looked up as he shoved it across the table.

"You take it, Chin Lee," he said. "Put it with the money Look Long keeps for the prizes. You know where he keeps it?"

"Yah. My know," said Chin Lee unguardedly.

He picked up the sack and disappeared. The moment the door closed behind him Boggs, followed by Silas,

slipped out the side entrance in time to see Chin Lee turn the house corner and pass down a dark alley. They followed him warily, bending low to keep him silhouetted against the sky.

Chin Lee walked quickly down the lane and turned in back of Look Long's house, where a big out-building loomed. He flung open a low-hung door and the earth seemed to swallow him up. Then the gleam of a candle showed faintly, and the two men heard the thud of a pick, followed by the dull scrape of a shovel. They crept noiselessly to the door and looked down into the interior where Chin Lee was digging a hole. In less than two minutes they saw him lift the lid of a wooden box in the hole and drop the sack into the aperture. Then he carefully refilled the hole, picked up his tools and blew out the candle. Boggs touched Silas gently on the arm.

"Back off as quietly as a shadow," he urged. "Now we know where he keeps the cash. We kin git it when we want it. I wish we knew where Carmelita's stowed that girl. She's as good as cash to us if we kin lay hands on her. But if the men find it out they'll murder us. I wonder where that slut Carmelita went to."

Carmelita had gone to her own house. She opened the door and thrust the shrinking Doris inside the place, where a stinking kerosene lamp burned low.

"I know w'ere I put you," said Carmelita, as she closed the door. "I put you where zat Sam Boggs not find you."

"Thank Heaven for that," muttered Doris. "What's your name?"

"Me? All ze worl' know me. My name ees Carmelita Munoz. W'y?"

"You're too pretty and too smart a woman to be a tool of that crooked Boggs. ' Don't you see he's just using you like he has the rest of them?"

"W'at you mean?" Carmelita was instantly all attention.

"He sent the Chinaman Look Long with a note demanding pay for me," said Doris. "Look Long'll probably bring that money back with him. If Look Long gives Boggs ten thousand dollars in gold, how much of it will anybody but Boggs get? Why don't you have some sense? Why don't you get the money from Look Long before Boggs sees it and then help me to get away? If you do that, my people will help you. If you don't help me, if you help Boggs keep me here, I tell you right now that the law will never let up till it gets you."

Carmelita grinned through the smoke of her cigarette.

"I do not need you an' your help. Me? I travel alone. but ze men tell me zat you weesh marry weeth zis man Boggs. Huh? Ecs zeets truc?"

"What? Marry that filthy beast? He's crazy and you're crazy too."

Carmelita shook her head decidedly.

"No. Sam Boggs not crazy, but he ver' ver' bad. Rotten. Two-t'ree times he promises marry wit' me, but every time he lie. He no do it. Eet make no difference. All he has zat I want is—money. If I get zat, I get cash enough to live in my own Tamaulipas. I not care."

"Then get it," said Doris earnestly. "Help me get away and I promise my people will help you all they can. I'll help you. Will you?"

"Maybe. I not promise. When I promise, I do eet. Jus' now I lock you up for ze night."

"No! No! Don't do that!" Doris struggled with

her wrists, but the silk handkerchief that bound them held like steel. "I'll promise you I will not run away."

Carmelita showed her white teeth like a wolf.

"You not have ze chance," she said grimly. "You come wit' me."

She rummaged in a closet and brought out a length of rusty chain with a lock on it.

"You come wit' me," she said again.

There was no help for it. If she resisted, Doris knew that Carmelita could summon a dozen men who would possibly not be gentle. Her arms were helpless. She could offer no resistance. She rose despondently and followed her captress.

Carmelita led her down a back street by devious paths behind odd houses where men were carousing, and past a big house where the lights burned smokily. She turned past the rear corner of this and pushed Doris toward a dark out-house that loomed in a small thicket of trees at the end of a littered path. It was built of heavy-cottonwood logs and was roofed with logs and earth. The heavy plank door was open, and a big lock with a rusty key in it hung from a nail.

"Ah. I teenk zis hol' you. In you go."

Doris, still struggling, was roughly forced down five steps into the dark interior. Carmelita pulled from a pocket a bit of candle, lit it and looked about her.

The place was a big root-cellar, but one that had not recently been used as such. The cellar had been dug some six feet deep and above that the heavy logs stood up like a wall. Even by the dim candle-light Doris could see small loop-holes along the walls that had been filled with rough battens and the clay floor was trampled to cement-like hardness. The place was a fortress.

"I teenk you stay here w'ere I put you. I make sure." Carmelita pulled her prisoner around and looked at her wrists. "You stay here all right, I teenk," she said. "Nobody know you here but me, an' I not tell. Wait." She seized a piece of tarred rope and tied it about the helpless girl's elbows and drew it tight behind her back. "Good night," she said laughing. "I hope you not 'ave ze dreams of Sam Boggs."

Doris heard the door slam and the click of the lock and she sank to the floor sobbing for the first time. Till now she had had some vague hope of rescue, but the cold click of that rusty lock shut out all hope. What of Look Long? What had he done? What would Chris Boden—No! She thought of the dark-faced trail-boss as Latigo—what would Latigo do, and where was her father?

CHAPTER XXI

LATIGO'S PLAN

LOOK LONG knew that to carry that note from Scalp Rock to the camp of the angry cow-punchers was akin to committing suicide. Welch agreed with him.

"They'll probably hang you with the first broken lariat they kin git," he said consolingly.

"More better I see girl first," said Look Long. "She can tell me where the camp is."

"Come on, then. She's in the room back of the saloon with Boggs an' the rest."

He followed Look Long to Boggs's saloon, where Boggs was arguing hotly with Carmelita and two men, while Doris, seated at the table, had her face buried in her arms. Boggs turned on the little Chinaman angrily.

"What the hell do you want now?" he demanded. "You take that note like I told you to."

"All lite." Look Long backed away from him. "First no can do till girl tell me where can find camp."

"All right. You ask her." He laid a rough hand on Doris's arm and she shuddered as she flinched away from him. "You better tell this Chink where he can find your friends," he said roughly. "Ask her, Look Long." And he turned away to Carmelita while Look Long turned to Doris.

"Dees man Chlis Boden," he said in a low tone. "You sabe him?"

An indefinable note in his voice made her look at him.

"Yes," she said in a low tone. "He is my good friend Do you know him?"

"Mebbee. Look Long not sure. I tink my *sabe* him long time ago. Listen, missy. Dees man Chlis Boden. You *sabe* him? What his pidgin?"

"What?"

"Pidgin. What he do?"

"Oh. His business? He's the trail-boss of the big herd. Cattle are his business. *Sabe?*"

"Yah. More better be sure. Dees man Boden."

He hesitated for a moment. He remembered well enough the man who had saved his life years before when two robbers were roasting his feet to make him give up his money. The man had driven off the men with a knife! He remembered that because his own people are adepts in the use of the knife. "Dees man Boden use dees. No use gun. Use dees." He touched a knife in his own belt.

Doris nodded swiftly.

"Yes. That's the man," she said. "He doesn't use a gun, but he is very swift with 'a knife. They call him 'Latigo,' but his real name is Chris Boden."

Look Long turned to Boggs.

"All lite, Boggs. My go now." And before anyone could have stopped him he was out of the door, leaving Doris staring after him. Was he friend or foe?

The two men at the ferry set him across the river, and he trudged away in the river mists on the track of the lost herd. Look Long was a one-idea person. He never forgot friend or foe, and it was the luck of the real Chris Boden to have made a friend of him. The cross-eyed little gambler never forgot the good turn that Latigo had done him.

As the sun rose, furrowing all the East into rose and gold, he saw the herd. The tired steers were all about him grazing noisily with heads to the rising sun, and tired waddies riding slowly about them. A mile away the white cover of the chuck-wagon stood out like a big white blister. Look Long headed for it, but was stopped by Dent.

"Stop right there, Chink," he said shortly. "You come from Scalp Rock?"

"Yah. My come see Latigo. Him my flen'."

"Your friend, is he? Well, that's different. Git over to the chuck-wagon, then. You're lucky if they don't kill you first. Hi, Latigo!" he shouted. "Here comes the Emperor o' China."

Latigo rose out of the fog at the shout. He recognized Look Long instantly and shook hands warmly. Look Long fairly beamed at him.

"My wanthec long time talk, Boden," he said.

"All right, old-timer. Go ahead. Sock in your spurs an' ride."

Look Long cast a crooked eye about him and it fell on Opp.

"Lainmaker, huh!" he said. "My got 'em tools. All thing lainmaker buy to make lain come down. My got um in my store now."

"What kind of things, Look Long? What're you talkin' about?"

"Huh. Two days past Mexican fleighter come in to Scalp Lock with boxes of medicine to make lain. Boggs him say, 'All lite, Look Long, you put um good place keep um dly.' One, two, twenty boxes. My have boys put 'em back side kitchen stove keep dly."

He told of Boggs's plan to get control of the herd, and

how the fake Chris Boden had planned it with him, for Look Long knew all that took place in Scalp Rock. He told Latigo how Doris had fallen into Boggs's hands and for a brief moment he knew cold fear as Latigo whirled about to face him. There was a look in Latigo's eyes that even Look Long did not care to face. As the cursing men closed in in a threatening circle, Latigo forced them back.

"Steady, boys," he said warningly. "Look Long's a good friend. Go on, Look Long."

Then Look Long gave him the note from Doris.

For a brief moment Latigo stood like one petrified. There could be but one consideration now. Herd—business—all sank into insignificance compared with Doris. She must be got out of the hands of the men in Scalp Rock. But how could it be done?

"Listen to me, Look Long," he said shortly. "How many men has this man Boggs got?"

Look Long told him. "All bad men, too," he said. "Every man thief and killer, too."

"Where'd they all come from, Look Long, and how long have they been in Scalp Rock?"

"Mebbee so two, three years. Just after you went south dis man Boggs come. Bling ten men. Get more men bime by." From the sketchy account that Look Long gave in very broken English, Latigo learned that Boggs had gathered a choice collection of jail-birds in Scalp Rock and that they had consistently looted for two years. He studied that note again. It said plainly that Doris would not be released till ten thousand dollars in gold was paid to Boggs, and it left Latigo in more of a quandary than ever.

Doris must be got back at once. That fact beat like a

hammer at his brain. The thought of her in the hands of that godless crew made him sick at heart. The money was in the chuck-wagon, but only a small part of that twenty-five thousand dollars belonged to Tonkaway, and Tonkaway was unconscious and could not be consulted. It might be days before he could be consulted. In the meantime Latigo must act.

The gaze of every man focused on him. Their anger had hardened to the edge of tool steel. The death of Shorty Burt, ridden down and shot to death by Boggs and Lem Silas, whom they knew still as Chris Boden, put the last whet to their temper's edge. Baldy Stone sensed it and whispered to Latigo. •

"For God's own sake, mind what you do," he said. "They're ready to charge hell with a bucket of water right now. We don't want to lose any more men. What the hell are you pokin' about in that wagon fer?" he demanded of Opp.

The rainmaker emerged from the chuck-wagon carrying old Baldy's most treasured possession, a ten-gauge shotgun.

"I'm goin' with you," said Opp. "I ain't much of a shot, but with this scatter-gun I kin git somebody, I reckon."

"Put that gun down," said Latigo sharply. "Listen, you fellows. This isn't just a case of rushin' the town. We can't do that. Here's why—Doris is hidden in that town. Nobody knows exactly where she is. Those houses are so thin and flimsy that one shot'll raze the whole town. We can't take a chance on hurtin' Doris. Sit down, Look Long. Let me think this out a bit."

Look Long sat down and waited with the patience of

his race, and Latigo smoked thoughtfully. Finally he rose.

"I've got it," he said.

"Listen, Look Long." He gripped the little gambler in a grip of steel. "This is important. You said that the supplies for this man Opp to make rain came in to Scalp Rock. What was in those boxes?"

"No can tell. All boxes say 'Keep Dly.' That all me know. Me keep dly. Me tell Chin Lee put all boxes back of kitchen stove near fire to keep dly."

"Good God!" Opp uttered a howl of dismay. "If your men have put them boxes by the kitchen stove, they've got a derned good chance of goin' to China by air route. If a spark gits into one o' them boxes hell'll sure break loose."

"What do you care?" demanded Baldy. "Ain't that what we want?"

"I was plannin' to use them supplies to make my reputation," said Opp. "I got a reputation to live up to."

"Huh. You're better off without any reputation that you make in Scalp Rock," said Latigo. "What's in those boxes, Opp?"

Opp told him in a hoarse whisper, and Latigo stared at him in evident disbelief. Finally he slapped Stevens on the back and nearly knocked him over.

"We've drawn a royal straight flush. If we can only play it," he said. "The big thing is to have Look Long find out just where Doris is. Look Long, can you find out where the girl is?"

"No can tell. If can do, will do."

"Good. First of all find out where they have put her. Then. Now listen, Look Long. All depends on this.

I want all those boxes that belong to Opp brought down to the river-bank without anybody knowing it. I want them put where I can get 'em. Can you do that?"

"Sure. Can do. Will do." Look Long nodded compliance.

"Good. You have those boxes carried down to the river-bank above the ferry and hide them in the bushes. I'll get them from there later. Another thing, Look Long. Will it be possible for you to gather all the men in Scalp Rock in one place to-night at ten o'clock? Can you do that? It means much."

Look Long nodded vigorously.

"Can do! Easy," he said. "Listen. I go back to Scalp Rock. I send word to Boggs and all the men that we have a big lottery drawing at ten o'clock. Big prize. Two thousand dollars. That brings out every man in Scalp Rock. Huh?"

Latigo almost knocked him over in his heavy-handed approval.

"You've got it," he almost shouted. "Sure, that'll draw 'em. It'll hold 'em, too. Be sure you pile those boxes by the river-bank where I can find them, and have the men in Scalp Rock all down to the lottery drawing."

"Yah! My *sabe*."

Then Latigo turned to his waiting men.

"Keep that herd back where the grazin' is good," he said. "Move 'em downstream but don't close-herd 'em. I want all Scalp Rock to believe we're here to stay. Water at the little creek that runs into the river from the south."

They moved off disgustedly as Latigo shook hands with Look Long and drew big Bill Stevens aside for consultation. That talk lasted for hours as they tested and re-tested a plan that they would not divulge, and old Baldy

rode herd on them. His only relief lay in watching Opp intent on business of his own. Because it was mysterious, it was all the more intriguing.

First he cleared a little circle, clearing off the brush and patting down the earth that he wet with water from the wagon. Then he placed a flat stone in the centre of the ring and placed four others on the corners of a square inside the circle and begged some tobacco from old Baldy, who watched him curiously. When he had placed a tiny heap of tobacco on each stone he laid a lighted ember on each heap and carefully blew the smoke to the four points of the compass. Baldy asked a question, but Opp shook his head. Finally the old cook could stand it no longer.

"What the hell are you doin'?" he demanded.

"I'm a-makin' rain," said Opp, breathing heavily as he wiped the sweat from his face. "Just one thing more an' it'll be perfect. This can't fail. I got to put it on the big stone in the middle. That's the altar o' sacrifice, you know. That's where it's got to be put."

"Put what?" demanded the mystified Baldy.

"I just want a li'l bit," said Opp placatingly. "Just about as much as a baby's drink o' whisky. But it can't come from me. You give it to me and the rain'll come as sure as hell. I got to have it."

"Have what?" demanded Baldy. "What you gabbin' about? What is it you want me to give you? I'll give it to you to shut you up. What is it?"

"Blood," said Andrew Opp.

Baldy took two quick back steps and seized an axe. His eyes were bulging. "You git to hell outen here," he shouted, backing quickly away. "You'll git more blood 'n you want here, but it won't be mine."

"It's got to be yourn," said Opp. "Mine won't do it. Yours will. Just a l'il bit an' the rain'll come."

Baldy swung the axe and Opp started to run but stumbled and fell over the altar of sacrifice. As he rose Baldy cackled feebly.

"Go ahead now an' make your damned rain," he said. "You got plenty o' blood. Look at your nose."

"How in hell kin I look at my own nose?" demanded Opp.

But he smeared some of his generous flow over a rock while Baldy got supper, keeping one eye on the rain-maker and the other on his fire. His axe was always within reach.

"It'll be dark in an hour," said Latigo as the men grouped about the fire to eat. "I'm countin' on you all to-night."

"What's in the wind for to-night?" asked White crisply.

"This. First we get Doris back from those damned crooks. Then we burn the town. Then we cross the herd."

"That's about all we want," said Dent slowly. "That's all we want."

"No." Latigo's eyes contracted into little gleaming points of light. "I'm goin' to make that man Biggs—Boggs—or whatever his name is—pay for the death of Shorty Burt. Boggs and that man who posed as Chris Boden have got an account to pay and I mean to collect to-night."

They eyed him with silent approval.

"Just one thing more. Baldy, get that new paulin off the chuck-wagon. I've got to have a big sheet of canvas without a hole in it. I want that 'paulin."

"That 'ere 'paulin," quoth Baldy, with the covetousness of a camp cook, "is brand new and it ain't got no holes. You can't have it."

"Oh, go to the devil, Baldy. Get me that 'paulin. And get an axe and a saw for Stevens. The rest of you wait here. I'll be back soon."

Then the sun sank.

CHAPTER XXII

ACROSS THE RIVER

LATIGO and Stevens got the 'paulin and the tools from the chuck-wagon and moved off into the dusk. Stevens wondered what plan Latigo had formed. He wondered more as they moved into a shallow arroyo full of half-grown cottonwood saplings. Without a word Latigo set to work to saw off a tall, slender tree.

"I want two more like this," he said. "And then some smaller ones. And don't make any noise that can be heard across the river."

Working, half by feel, they toiled and panted till they got the trees cut and trimmed.

"Now carry 'em to the river-bank where we can't be seen from the other side. I'll explain to you there."

On the lip of the dark bank, with the roar of the river in their ears, he explained.

"I'm goin' to make a boat with these saplings and the 'paulin," he said.

"We don't need a boat," said Stevens quickly. "We kin all swim."

"Crossin's only a small part of it," said Latigo. "There's a lot of dynamite in the supplies that came down to Scalp Rock for Opp, and Look Long has stored the whole supply in his kitchen back of the store. I mean to set fire to the town, but I want to get that dynamite out before I do it. We don't know where Doris is and she might be hurt if that dynamite goes off. Look Long is to

have all those supplies brought down to the river-bank above the ferry. I mean to cross the river and get those supplies. I'm going to cross now and get those explosives out of the way so I at least know where they are. We can't take a chance on hurting Doris."

"You mean you're goin' to try to paddle that—that damn thing over the river?"

They tied two long saplings to make a rough ellipse. To this they lashed the longest tree, bending the ends. The ribs were made of small branches and the big 'paulin was lashed in place over the rough framework. It was heavy and clumsy and it was far from safe, but it was the only sure way to get that dynamite out of Scalp Rock. Latigo climbed gingerly into it and picked up a small piece of board that he had brought with him for a paddle.

The current caught it as Stevens thrust it into the deep water and he stood staring after it. What a fool old Latigo was to try a thing like that! How he must have fallen for Doris to try to assault a town like Scalp Rock with twenty-two men! Boggs had nearly a hundred. It would be much better, Stevens thought, to take the ferry-boat and try to rush the town before an alarm could be given. Latigo was crazy.

But Latigo was thinking entirely in terms of Doris.

A hundred yards from shore he realized his mistake. He should have made his attempt below the ferry. The current was sweeping him down upon the ferry and four men were gathered about a fire there. They were watching the ferry, to be sure there was no attempt to cross the herd. If they once saw that clumsy canoe his plan would fail.

Very quietly he tipped the heavy craft till the water ran over the gunwale and slipped into the stream without

even a ripple. Then, by alternate pulls and shoves, he drove shoreward where a line of stunted bushes lined the water's edge. His breath came sobbingly as he crept up the narrow beach under the shelter of the canoe. So far, so good. The men at the ferry had not seen him.

There were four men by that fire. Three were drinking and playing cards, and the fourth sat with his rifle across his knees watching the ferry-boat. No chance to get that boat without a row that would wake the town. Suddenly a man drifted up to the fire out of the night, and Latigo saw that it was a Chinaman. But it was not Look Long. It was fairly certain that Look Long had sent one of his own race on some errand connected with his part of the plan. One of the card-players looked up and Latigo could hear his hail.

"Hello, Chin Lee. Look Long send you down here? What the hell do you want?"

Clear and distinct came Chin Lee's answer.

"Look Long tell me, tell all men he have big prize-drawin' this night at ten o'clock in saloon. Two thousand dollars first prize. Mebbe so you want buy ticket."

Did they want to buy tickets for the biggest drawing that Scalp Rock had ever had? They nearly assaulted him in their eagerness. No such drawing had ever been held in Look Long's lottery. Five hundred dollars was the limit of the daily drawings, and Sam Boggs usually won that.

"Here, Pyle! You an' Pett watch the boat while we go buy some lottery tickets. Two thousand'll set a man up in business for keeps."

When they had stumbled noisily up the track towards Latigo worked his way silently along the shadow of the bank till he fell over the pile of boxes that Look

Long had placed on the river-bank in the darkness of a tangled thicket. Chin Lee had heaped them carefully.

So far so good. All Opp's supplies were there! Fumblingly Latigo brought out a small bottle of matches and, cupping one in his hands, examined the boxes. He knew the dynamite boxes almost by instinct and it took him less than an hour to carry the entire supply to the water's edge. He dared not leave that dynamite near the rest of the supplies while he carried out the rest of his plan. The flat surface of the old Scalp Rock itself was the place for that dynamite! A lone rock in the middle of the driving flood,

But he did not realize how much that firelight showed nor how much noise he made stumbling through the brush. A sudden fall against a dry bush made the men by the fire jump.

"What in hell's that? There's some one or somethin' in the brush."

The man picked up his rifle and headed straight for where Latigo crouched in the shadow of the bank. Foot by foot the man drew nearer and Latigo held his breath till he thought he would burst. If he were discovered all was lost. He did not have any gun to use. But he had better than a gun. His hand dropped to the weighted hilt of that deadly knife at his hip. He was taking a big chance. If he missed he was discovered and he would be only half armed! His hand came slowly up over his shoulder as the man topped the rise. Then he threw!

Years of constant practice had given him an uncanny skill with those weighted knives. They would turn over once in twelve feet, twice in twenty-four, and he knew just what he could do. He did not want to kill the man. He reversed the knife so that it lay butt forward in his

palm. The heavy handle weighted with two pounds of lead struck the man like a bullet squarely under the ear and downed him like a pole-axed ox.

He fell without a groan and lay in a huddled heap as Latigo leaped upon him to stifle any outcry. It was the work of a short minute to lash the man's hands with his own belt and to gag him with a stick tied fast at the back of his neck. His own suspenders gave the means to lash his feet and Latigo rolled him under a clump of brush. For a brief moment he considered rushing the lone guard at the ferry. It was too risky. He padded back to the canoe and worked his way back to the south bank where Stevens waited him.

"I got all the dynamite piled on Scalp Rock," said Latigo, "and I put one of their men out of business. I hope Look Long gets all their crowd in his place for his lottery drawing."

Chin Lee's word of the big prize set Scalp Rock aflame with desire. No such prize had ever been offered there. Two thousand dollars was a fortune! Most of the men were already in the saloon when Chin Lee spread the news. Boggs, still in the back room, heard the clamour and his face darkened. He turned to a waiter, and Chin Lee came in.

"Look Long's back, is he? You tell him I want to see him at once."

"All lite. My tell um."

Chin Lee departed and almost instantly Look Long appeared, drifting in as silently as a shadow.

"Well." Boggs rose and stood over him threateningly. "What'd you find out?"

"My see dees man Boden," said Look Long. "Him say can pay gold to-morrow. No can get to-night. Boden

say must see old man. Old man heap sick. Pay gold to mollow for piecee girl. Where you keep her?"

"None o' your damred business. She's safe enough."

"All lite. That no my pidgin—business."

Look Long was very deferential. Suspiciously so, if Boggs had only realized it. He went out at once and left Boggs greatly disturbed.

He had trusted too much to Carmelita. He did not know where Doris was and she meant ten thousand dollars to her owner. He must find out where Carmelita had put her. Even when Boden paid over the money he had no intention of giving up Doris. His plans were deeper laid than that. He meant to get the cash, to have the girl disappear and place the blame on Carmelita and then himself disappear suddenly, heading for the Mexican Line. He went into the bar, where a dozen men had gathered. The excitement over the big lottery drawing set fire to their imaginations and the liquor was potent. They greeted his arrival with shouts.

"Nuthin' certain yet, boys," he said. "Look Long says they'll pay ten thousand for the girl to-morrow, but we ain't got it yet. Anybody seen Carmelita or Silas?"

"She went to her house a while ago," said some one.

But Carmelita was not at her house, and Boggs strode impatiently up and down the street till he saw a light catch in the back room. Carmelita had entered the place by a back door. Before she could rise from her chair Boggs flung the door open and stood over her.

"Git some cups," he snarled as he dragged a bottle from his pocket. "It's been long since we had a two-handed talk, you an' me. I couldn't stay away, Carmelita, an' that's a fact. You an' me don't want to fight. We

both want money an' we kin make a pile if we work together. The ransom money, fer that white-faced girl'll amount to ten thousand an' we'll split that two ways. You an' me. Then we'll pull our freight fer Mexico and let the others holler fer the money. Suit you?"

She nodded with her eyes fixed on him.

"All right! Now we know where we stand." He was almost jovial. "That Chink Look Long's got a lot o' money, too, mine and his'n; and them cattlemen'll pay ten thousand fer the girl. We'll git the cash from them; we'll get Look Long's roll an' we'll hit the trail for Coahuila. Suit you?"

"What about the girl?"

"Oh, hang the girl. When we've got the money, we'll pull our freight and leave the bunch to straighten out the matter of the girl. There'll be hell poppin', too. They're sure to take it up with the law. Scalp Rock is busted flat after this. It's time to be gettin' out. That girl don't count. You're the only girl for me, Carmelita. Where've you put her?"

"I put her in Look Long's root-cellar," said Carmelita slowly.

Boggs gave a quick exclamation.

"When did you put her there?" he demanded quickly.

She told him, and he drew a breath of relief. It was all clear now. She had locked Doris in the root-cellar after he and Silas had watched Chin Lee bury the sack of gold there. She knew nothing of the sack or of where Look Long's gold was hidden. The only person besides himself who knew that was—Lena Silas. He rose quickly.

"Keep your mouth shut about our talk," he said. "I'm goin' down to Look Long's fer the lottery drawin'. I'll

buy you a ticket, too. We'd better cash in all we kin before we leave."

She peered over his shoulder into the dark street crowded with drunken men and excited women all headed for Look Long's place. The big lottery drawing was on!

CHAPTER XXIII

DEAD OR ALIVE

THE announcement of that big prize drew every man and woman to Look Long's gambling-hell. Four big kerosene lamps illuminated the place with a smoky glare and red-and-white streamers of paper gave a touch of colour. The social air was lent by a score of short-skirted, thoroughly painted women from the Bird Cage who mixed with the crowd, dancing, drinking and dicing with anyone who had money. A placard at the end of the room announced in glaring letters:

ANY LADY OR GENTLEMAN TOO
DRUNK TO DANCE WILL BE FIRED.
FROM THE FLOOR

Carmelita was the official hostess. More than once she had thought of compelling Doris to serve drinks, but some remaining touch of sanity forbade her.

Boggs was in his element. He had discovered where Look Long kept his cash and where Carmelita had locked up Doris, and Look Long had told him that the outfit across the river would pay ten thousand dollars for the girl just as soon as old Tonkaway could be talked to. He rather hoped Tonkaway would die. If he could compel Doris to marry him Tonkaway's death would be providential. But—how could he compel Doris to marry him? If he could keep her with him so long that no decent

person would have anything to do with her he felt that she would see no other way of escape. But if he carried her off he must get away before the Lazy M outfit paid the money for her release. Too, he knew that soon he would have a show-down with that cursed Chris Boden. Boden had several things to avenge. It would be wiser to get that money and leave at once. But he hated the thought of leaving Scalp Rock. It exactly suited him. He did not know that the knell of Scalp Rock had already rung.

As he stood at the end of the bar watching the crowd he caught the eye of a man who was staring at him. He knew the man well enough. It was Ben Newton, a freighter, who made frequent trips south along the old trail, buying up cattle and hides. Newton's wagons, newly arrived, were parked north of Scalp Rock, for he knew the place and would take no chances. He wormed his way over to Boggs.

"I was lookin' fer you," whispered Newton. "I want to talk with you. There's a warrant out fer your arrest up North, Boggs."

Boggs's face darkened but his eyes shifted.

"What're you talkin' about?" he demanded. "I been livin' right here fer two years."

"That's what they want you fer," said Newton. "It's nothin' to me. I just thought you'd be interested in hearin' the news."

"I am." Boggs licked his lips. "Who swore out the warrant an' who's to serve it?"

"The Warden of the Federal Pen at Leavenworth an' the Wells-Fargo people swore out the warrant," said Newton. "They been on your trail ever since you jumped your bail-bond after old Boden died. It reads Biggs,

alias Boggs, keepin' a joint in Scalp Rock. I seen a copy of it. Bill Boyd the deputy Federal marshal's got it. He's on his way here. He was to come down day before yesterday. He swears he'll take you back to Leavenworth, Sam."

"They must have got me mixed up with somebody else," said Boggs desperately.

Newton shook his head.

"Sam, Boyd don't make no mistakes," he said. "Ever seen a Federal warrant, Sam? It reads 'arrest, dead or alive.' I got a paper in my pocket you'll like to see. Better take me into a back room."

Boggs picked up a bottle and glasses and without a word led the way into a room behind the bar. He filled both glasses and thrust one at Newton, who spluttered over the raw liquor, thrust a hand into a pocket and brought out a soiled paper.

"Read that," he said.

Boggs took the paper and with bulging eyes read it. It was a roughly printed bill that said simply '\$5000 reward, dead or alive,' and below the caption was a very fair cut of Sam Biggs, wanted for the robbery of the Drybone gold shipment. It stated that he had jumped his bail-bond and that he was wanted.

"That ain't me," said Boggs. But his voice broke. "I'm much obliged to you, Newton, even if they are after the wrong man."

"Yeah." Newton poured a drink and leisurely sipped it. "To kill a guilty man is bad enough. To wipe out an innocent man is plumb hell."

"All the same, I'm obliged to you."

He was, too! That notice settled all doubts. He must leave Scalp Rock at once and quickly. There was but one

place he could find safety! Across the Line into Mexico if he could make it. He wondered if he could raise cash on his property in Scalp Rock. Newton interrupted him.

"What do you reckon them fellers in the bar-room would give to know what we know?" he asked casually.

Boggs turned upon him in a blaze of fury.

"That's your game, is it? I thought you was doin' me a favour."

"Ain't it a favour to let a man know there's a reward out fer him, dead or alive? If I'd wanted to git that reward, I could have killed you while you was takin' that drink."

Boggs raised a hand to his drink, but Newton misunderstood the movement. There was a quick flip of his hand and his heavy six-gun was at Boggs's belly.

"I never shoot at the head," said Newton grimly. "The bones might turn a bullet. Sides that, you can't miss the belly. What's it to be, Boggs? If I give 'em this paper in the bar, you'll be dead before mornin'."

That was true and Boggs knew it. That paper would transform the men of Scalp Rock into rabid wolves. The man who killed him would get five thousand dollars and a pardon for all offences. He must buy Newton's silence.

"What's it worth?" he asked. "What's yore price?"

"What you got?" asked Newton.

"I got no cash," muttered Boggs, "but I got a scheme that'll net ten thousand to-morrer."

He outlined briefly the plan that was to mulct the Lazy M and the Crutch J of ten thousand dollars. Newton shook his head positively.

"I ain't buyin' a dead horse," he said. "Even if you got that money and turned it over to me, how long would I live when yore men found it out? You got to do better'n

that. You set down there and make out a bill of sale for all you own here in Scalp Rock." He seized a paper and pencil from the table. "Just sit down and write what I say," he said. "If you don't, so help me, I'll give this paper to the crowd outside."

There was no help for it. Boggs took the pencil and with trembling fingers wrote.

"By God," he growled brokenly, "you're takin' all I've got. This leaves me as naked as a jay."

"You can't take it with you to Leavenworth," said Newton.

He folded the paper, thrust it into his pocket and backed out of the door, closing it gently behind him.

When that door closed Boggs gave himself up to a perfect volcano of unchecked rage. He stamped up and down the room, cursing everything above and below the earth. Finally he sank into a chair as the door flung open and Lem Silas stood in the doorway.

Since his desertion of the herd and his arrival in Scalp Rock Silas had been drinking steadily and his face showed it. He was flushed with liquor and his eyes were hot. Also his holster was tied down. It was evident that the old-time trail-boss was 'on the prod.'

"I heard every word that man Newton said," he said. "Listen here, Boggs! You've raised hell with every turn o' the cards. You like to get us all sent up over that Wells-Fargo deal. You made a fool o' yourself over old man Boden's death; an' now you've just about ruined the biggest cinch we ever had. If you'd let that herd cross the river we could have had the wagon, the cattle and the girl. But you started a fight an' kept 'em from crossin'. Now we got nothin'."

"I tell you——" Boggs rose threateningly.

"Shut up! You tell me nothin'! If Ben Newton says the Federal marshal is after you or us, I quit. I'm not goin' to Leavenworth or to a gallows if you are. You and I'll get that cash that the Chink's salted away. I'll give you just a quarter of that. The rest is mine. If you try to double-cross me, I'll kill you and get the five thousand reward. No, you don't!"

He seized Boggs's swiftly moving hand in an iron grip, snatched a heavy pistol from Boggs's holster and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"First of all we got to get horses for our getaway," said Silas.

Almost entirely sobered, Boggs glared at him. Silas was right. There was no other alternative. Their plans had failed and they must get away at once. Newton would surely tell what he knew and Boggs's life would not be worth a plugged quarter. Then another thought came. If he could only get rid of this man Silas! He knew that as a last resort Silas would turn State's evidence if he got a chance. If he did, that meant a noose for the murder of old man Boden. He might yet get a chance at Silas.

"Come on," he said. "We'll get to the corral and get the horses. Then we'll git the cash."

They dragged three saddles from the back room and headed for the big corral at the end of the settlement, for it was an unwritten law in Scalp Rock that all horses were kept in one big corral.

"What you takin' two horses for?" demanded Silas as Boggs cinched his second horse.

"I'm headin' south," said Boggs. "I may need one."

He intended that spare horse for Doris, but he could not say so. If he got a chance at Silas he might yet get

Doris and the gold from the root-cellar and make a final getaway. Once in his hands, she'd be a perfect safeguard for him. He could always buy immunity for part of his offences. Too, she meant cash to him and more.

"I'll sure need a spare horse," he said, raising his head from the cinch.

For the first time he was aware of the sky. He had never in five years seen a skyline like that. Low down to the west a gibbous moon lay behind a piled cloud wrack. Those clouds had been banking unnoticed for three hours. A sudden flash of lightning leapt across the sky and a clap of thunder made the earth tremble and recoil.

"Huh! That's damned good. Rain at last! I needn't have got that man Opp after all." Boggs grinned. "It'll sure wash out my trail. Turn all the other horses loose, Silas, so they can't foller us."

They dropped the corral bars and the horses fled into the chaparral. They led their own horses down the lane towards Look Long's place where the root-cellar lay. A second flash of lightning lit all space and made Boggs cover his face with his free hand.

"Gosh, but that's blindin'," he said. "We're due for one hell of a break-up. Likely a cloudburst in the hills. Let's get that cash now."

They tied their horses to the fence and examined the door of the root-cellar. It was locked and the lock resisted all their efforts.

"Damn it all," growled Silas. "The lock's too strong to break. If we make a noise somebody'll hear us."

"Carmelita's got the key," said Boggs. "Wait here. I'll get her."

Silas seized him in a grip that hurt.

"You go get that key," he said fiercely. "If you ain't back here in five minutes with that key, I'll 'bust loose into the lottery drawin' and tell 'em all I know about the reward for you—dead or alive. Play straight, Boggs, for once."

"I will! I swear I will! I'll get the key!"

He found Carmelita by the bar with two men. At sight of his crooking finger she came over to him.

"What you want?" she demanded sullenly.

"Say, Carmelita," he whispered, "you better take a look at that girl you got locked up. I heard Chin Lee say somethin' to one of the waiters about gettin' some grub fixed up for a woman. Maybe he knows where you've got her. It can't hurt none for you to take a look an' see if she all right. I'll wait here. Go right over."

She gave him a quick glance.

"I must go to my house first to get the key," she said. "If you wêesh to be sure she ees all right, meet me at the place. You know."

He nodded in assumed indifference and leaned across the bar, but the moment she left the room he reopened the door, passed out and fairly leapt down the path behind her.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAIL-BOSS CROSSES THE RIVER

THE new trail-boss of the big herd was worried. His plans were working well. He had got that dangerous dynamite out of Scalp Rock. But he had not found out where Doris was imprisoned. That was most important of all. He dared not run his men loose to shoot up Scalp Rock till he knew that Doris was safe from their shots. A bullet would go through a dozen of those flimsy houses. Indiscriminate shooting would rake the town.

He had removed that dynamite. He had all of Opp's explosives hidden on the river-bank and he had a rough boat to cross the stream. He meant to pay off all debts this night. Sam Boggs for his outrage to Doris—that was first. Sam Boggs for the murder of his father, whom he loved. This man who had passed himself off as Chris Boden. He had a long score to settle quite apart from the murder of Shorty Burt. But how could he find out where Doris was?

The quick, spluttering, long crackle of a vicious lightning flash made him jump. It snapped across all space and lit the sky. Then came the rain. There must be a heavy rain in the hills, he thought. By noon the river would be bank-full and impassable except by the ford. He must act at once. He strode back to the fire that two men had rebuilt from the 'cooney' and Opp came suddenly up to him.

"That's only the beginnin'," he began, jubilantly, jerking a finger at the sky. "I told you I can bring rain when I really start in to do it. You just wait! You'll see! I done that!"

"You—did—what?" Latigo's glance went back to Opp, to the western sky. Great masses of heavy clouds obscured the moon, and a quick, angry, jagged lightning flash blinded them for a second.

"I done that," said Opp excitedly. "I tell you I brung on this rain."

"You did like hell." Old Baldy jerked him aside. "You 'git to hell outen here. It was my prayin' done it. I been prayin' ever since sun-up, ain't I, Latigo? You heerd me. Ain't I?"

"I heard what you said," said Latigo. "Some of it sounded like words I've heard in prayers, but they weren't in the same order. 'Two of you get that remuda rounded up before the storm drives the horses crazy.'"

He turned to the waiting men.

"Three of you close-herd the cattle," he said. "Now, listen."

They gathered in a close-lipped ring about him.

"Here's what I aim to do. You know what those damned bandits over in Scalp Rock have done! First, they's got Doris. That's the biggest count against 'em. They've stampeded our herd an' they've killed Shorty Burt. That much for that! The man Boggs, who is their boss, was head of the Nighthawks up in Montana years ago. He robbed a bank shipment and was held for trial. While he was out on bail he murdered my father. That's Boggs! I knew him the minute I saw him. Likely, too, that man who passed himself on old Tonkaway's

over there, too. I got a little account for him, too, but first of all we want Doris. Are you all willin' to back my play?"

"Where's the joke?" demanded Dent when the silence became oppressive.

Latigo grinned. He had his answer.

"Come on down to the river-bank," he said tersely, "and bring your hardware."

Saddle-guns and six-guns were instantly produced.

"Now every man get about six feet of line of some kind. An old lariat'll do fine. Rifle slings, you know. You'll need both hands free for use."

They jerked a slash-line into pieces and laughingly fell in behind him. At sight of the clumsy canvas canoe they burst into laughter.

"It's to carry the guns," said he. "You all got to swim."

"Five of 'em got to stay behind," said Stevens. "They can't swim."

"Like hell we'll stay behind," quoth Davis.

"Listen, now! All the dynamite is out on Scalp Rock, so there's no danger from it. Put your guns in the boat, take hold of the edges and swim, but don't make any noise. We mustn't give the alarm till we're ready. Start, Brown."

He made four trips with that crazy craft and he finally herded seventeen half-drowned waddies into the pocket of the river-bank where Look Long had piled the boxes. As he thrust the boat up the shingle after the last trip a bedraggled figure stumbled out of the boat and fell up against him.

"It's me—Opp," said the rainmaker in an injured tone. "It was me brung of this rain. It's mine an' I come along

to pay Boggs what I owe him. What you goin' to do now?"

"Wait and see!"

Latigo handed Dent an axe and gave him some low-voiced instructions that set him to work to pry off the lids of the boxes noiselessly. Box after box fell open in the brush and above them the lightning snapped and jumped from cloud to cloud. It was evident that that storm when it came would be unlike any they had seen.

"A couple of you come with me." Latigo touched two men on the arms. "I was over here a while ago and I ran into one of their men. I got him tied up over here. If he hasn't got away."

He moved silently through the scrub to the bush where his prisoner still lay. The moment they laid hands on him in the darkness he twisted and turned and thrashed about till a six-gun in his ribs told him to be quiet.

"Where has your man Boggs put Miss Kane—the girl they got?" demanded Latigo in a low, tense voice.

"I don't know. If I knew I wouldn't tell you."

"Oh, yes, you would. You'll gabble like a parrot before I'm done with you if I choose."

There was a deadly menace in his tone that made his own men stare at him. This was a Latigo that they had never known. The man stared hard at him as Latigo cupped a match, and something that he saw loosed the bonds of speech.

"Listen," he said hoarsely, "I take that back. I'll tell you all I know. Ma an' Wentworth picked up the girl on the prairie after your herd stampeded. We had nothin' to do with that. We didn't know who she was, but we took her over to Scalp Rock an' turne' her over to Boggs."

THE TRAIL-BOSS CROSSES THE RIVER 239

He swears he's goin' to make her marry him if he kin, and you believe me he's goin' to use some persuasion if he kin. When he's had her a while, she'll probably be willin' to marry anybody."

He never knew how close he stood to death as he spoke. Latigo bit his lips till the blood ran. The man went on.

"Boggs sent Look Long, a Chink, with a note to your camp to tell your outfit that he'd turn the girl back to you for ten thousand in cash er cattle. He gave the girl to Carmelita over in Scalp Rock to be locked up so nobody could git at her. Carmelita's got the girl. Even Sam Boggs don't know where she's at."

"Who's Carmelita?" demanded Latigo dully.

"She's been livin' with Boggs for two years," said Eames. "She runs the dance-hall over there an' takes care of the girls."

"Why was she put in charge of the girl?"

"Because nobody in Scalp Rock'll trust Boggs. He'd double-cross his own self fer a nickel."

"Where's Boggs now?"

"Him and that new man Silas's been trailin' about doin' a lot o' plain an' fancy drinkin'. They're up at Look Long's place now, I reckon. There's to be a big lottery drawin' fer two thousand dollars cash prize at ten o'clock at Look Long's."

Latigo's heart gave a great leap. His plan was working out to schedule exactly as he and Look Long had fixed it.

"Take this man to the boat," he said. "Tie him in so that if he don't lie still he'll upset the boat and drown. I'd advise you to be as still as an oyster in that boat," he said grimly. "If you move you'll die."

With the reluctant Eames, who had too much sense to resist, in their midst, they rejoined the group by the piled boxes.

"First give every man a box of these waterproof matches," said Latigo quickly.

In two minutes they were distributed, and again they waited.

"What's that?"

A match spluttered, hidden in a cupped hand, and Opp uttered a low howl of dismay.

"My Gawd," he said. "They've took all my rain-makin' supplies. How kin I make any more rain after to-night without any supplies? 'This was just luck to-night. I need them supplies, I tell you."

"Shut up, you fool. The rain's comin' now. You don't need any more."

That truth was self-evident. The sky, that had cleared in spots after the first fierce shower and the lightning, was as black as ink and the lambent lightning played fitfully across it.

"We're due to catch hell in a few minutes," said Latigo, turning up his coat collar. "Stevens, you take seven men and stay right here by those haystacks." He pointed to a dozen stacks of bottom hay that Scalp Roek had piled for winter use. "I'm going to take the rest of the men into the town. Give me ten minutes to get into place. When you hear two shots, set fire to the stacks and come a-runnin' to me. All right. Give out the supplies."

Brown thrust forward with both hands full of long, dark staves taken from the boxes.

"Take these, Bowen! Here, Dent! Powers, stick out both paws!"

He thrust into each ready hand a bundle of long, dark objects. They grasped them instinctively, waiting a word of explanation. It came from Latigo.

"Here's our big chance," he said grimly. "Each man has got a box of waterproof matches and six big Devil rockets. They ain't just Fourth of July rockets that make a show. They're high explosives. They were made to bring on rain—if they can. They're regular hand artillery, I tell you. They'll sure blow hell out of Scalp Rock and that's just what we aim to do. For God's sake be careful. One of those rockets'll go right through a man. It'll kill a man or fire a house. God help Sam Boggs and his outfit when we once get started.

"Stevens with seven men'll stay here till we get into position on the far side of the town. All Scalp Rock is in the Chinaman's big gamblin'-hell. When we get in position, Stevens'll fire the haystacks here and join us. The fire and the shootin'll bring 'em all out of the gamblin' joint and we'll have 'em in a bunch. The minute you see 'em, give 'em hell and plenty of it. Don't make any mistake about it. If you don't get them, they'll get you. Don't use a gun unless you have to. The rockets will give 'em a big surprise. They can't stand what they never saw before. Burn Scalp Rock to the ground! Only one thing! Be careful! Don't let a woman get hurt if you can help it. The two people we want are—first of all Carmelita and the man Boggs! Most of all I want the woman Carmelita!"

"How about Boggs?" demanded a voice.

"You better leave him to me." There was a note in the voice of their trail-boss that satisfied them all.

"Come on, men." He picked out his party. "The rest of you stay with Stevens here. When you come, come

a-runnin'. Keep your matches dry. Here comes the rain in earnest now."

A sudden lash of rain drove down in a quick-falling flood and he bent against it as he moved off through the brush with his men behind him.

"Hell'll sure break loose in five minutes," he said over his shoulder as he passed.

CHAPTER XXV

SCALP ROCK'S END

HELL had already broken loose in Scalp Rock. It started in Boggs's saloon when the bartender announced the big lottery drawing.

"The big prize of two thousand dollars, the biggest drawin' this city has ever beheld, will be drawed at ten o'clock in Look Long's emporium. You chuckle-heads better buy your tickets right now. Two thousand in gold."

"Where's it at?" demanded a raucous voice. "We been skinned before. If Boggs an' the Chink are drawin' fer two thousand it's because they figger on makin' five. Let's see the two thousand!"

"Good God! I ain't got it in my pants," shrilled the frightened bartender. "Look Long's got it, an' he ain't come in yit. It'll be here in time."

"Like hell it will if Boggs and Look Long are runnin' it. We want to see it before we buy tickets."

The thoroughly alarmed bartender turned to Chin Lee.

"Yah! What you want?" Chin Lee was frankly scared and he showed it. He had seen Scalp Rock crowds go crazy before.

"You'd a damn sight better let 'em see that money, Chin Lee. They'll wreck the place if they don't see the cash. Find Look Long an' tell him. Git the two thousand dollars and show it to 'em, Chin Lee."

Chin Lee needed no further appeal. But Look Long

was not at hand. However, he had himself hidden that two thousand dollars that Boggs had given him and he could get it at once. He slipped outside the bar and headed for the root-cellar at a run. He got to the door of the cellar while Boggs was still looking for Carmelita and Silas with the horses was standing concealed by the corner of the place seeing nothing.

The moment Chin Lee's hand reached for the familiar wooden pin that held the door it struck the chain that Carmelita had placed on the door. He knew at once what had happened. Some one else had come to that place! Some one knew that he had Look Long's gold buried in that cellar! His heart sank a little. He loved Look Long and he would not willingly see him robbed.

He slipped around the corner of the building and got the pick that he had used to dig the hole, put one end under the hasp and put his weight on it. No lock made by man could stand the strain. It bent and broke and the door gave suddenly and swung open to his touch. He fumbled through the darkness to the place where he had dug the hole and thrust both hands deep in the still loose earth. He meant not only to get that two thousand, but to take the twenty thousand of Look Long's cache and find a new hiding-place for it.

The noise he made at the door almost paralysed Doris as she crouched in the far corner of the big root-cellar hoping, praying. Who was entering the place? Was it Boggs? Or Carmelita? Either meant no good to her. She heard some one shuffle down the steps. She could see nothing, and the only sound was the continuous patter of the falling rain on the earthen roof.

Then came a quick lightning flash and by its gleam she saw something that almost won a scream from

her. She saw a Chinaman bending over the hole in the floor.

And more than that! She saw in the square of the open door the evil face of Boggs staring into the place with the face of the ex-trail-boss of the Lazy M showing over his shoulder. She bit her lips to repress a shriek that would have told her location.

But that lightning flash was long enough for tragedy. Both white men leapt forward. But with different motives. Silas, thinking Chin Lee was robbing the cache that he wanted for himself, leapt for Chin Lee. His heavy six-gun crashed down upon the defenceless head and Chin Lee rolled into the hole that he had dug. His skull was fractured by that steel-shod pistol butt and he lay inert and still.

The next moment another flash lit up the place and a banging roar filled the room as Boggs's heavy gun flashed its shot into Lem Silas, still feeling for his victim. At less than two feet Boggs could not miss. The one-time Chris Boden rolled over on top of his victim.

Boggs rose to his feet and fumbled his way to the door. He felt for a match but had none. Cursing at his own neglect, he stood still for a brief second. Carmelita had not yet come. The girl was in this room. He needed a light. He could not see to get that money. Then——

A sudden smashing roar filled all space. A long, ear-splitting crackle, followed by another roar, made the very earth tremble and jump and smashed all lesser sounds into a silence as a red glare licked up the sky. Smoky tongues of flame leapt twenty feet in air and a shower of sparks rushed up in the driving rain as the great haystacks by the corral burst into flame where Stevens and his men did their appointed task.

With a muttered curse Boggs rushed for the steps. Trouble of some kind had come and he must know what it was. Where was Carmelita? He must get a light. He must get that money out of the hole and make his getaway while there was time. He almost fell up the steps to see by the smoky light of burning buildings a great crowd of men rush from Look Long's gambling-hell as, with the first sight of that oncoming crowd, Latigo Jones with his men leapt into action.

"Get every man," he shouted. His voice carried above the roar and crackle of the flames. "But first of all get the woman Carmelita. Leave Sam Boggs to me if you find him."

A long crackling, spitting crack of light flashed into a sudden blinding glare. A long, reverberating, thunderous crash that made the whole earth tremble sent him to his knees. The earth rocked as though in pain. Followed a terrible twisting and turning and upheaval of all Nature and a small, flat, smacking report that dominated all space. Latigo staggered to his feet. He knew by instinct what it was.

"Good God!" he shouted. "The lightning has exploded the dynamite on Scalp Rock. Here they come! Give 'em all the hell we've got!"

They came out of Look Long's place in a swelling flood, cursing, swearing, eager to find Boggs, who staggered out of the root-cellar in time to head the rushing crowd to meet the fiery hell that broke loose in their very faces.

A ten-pound projectile from a Devil rocket left Latigo's hand with a rushing roar and struck a man squarely in the body. He went down shrieking, and a maddened rush swept over him as his clothes burst into flames.

Another rocket struck Perry in the back as he turned to run. Then Stevens and his men came, yelling as they came, heralding their coming by a storm of pistol shots and a barrage of rocket-fire. Latigo and his men swung to the left and headed straight for the milling crowd.

Even Boggs could not hold them under that. With all Scalp Rock ablaze before them, with the river rising behind them, with a bursting fire of deadly rockets in their faces and deadly shots taking toll of them, they broke and ran.

"Look in every house for Doris before you set it afire," shouted Latigo above the turmoil. "Then when you know she's not in it fire every house. A fire burns out lice. Don't hurt this house. It belongs to Look Long!"

He turned savagely on a man who seized him by the arm. It was Look Long jabbering excitedly.

"My tell you chop-chop Boden," he shrieked excitedly. "Quick! Zees girl Carmelita know where girl is. Here is Carmelita."

He jerked his finger at Carmelita coming out of her own house. She dodged around the crowd and headed at a run along the lane. Latigo saw her run. She and she alone knew where Doris was. He rushed after her. Two men in his way were knocked aside. He burst through a running group and as he turned the corner of a house he saw the man he longed most to meet. Boggs! The man who had killed old Sam Boden! Who, with the pretended Chris Boden, had killed Shorty Burt! Who had carried off Doris! Who had her now somewhere in this accused place!

Boggs recognized him at the same moment. His pistol

flashed but missed and Latigo came on with such a rush that Boggs dared not face him. There was no time to choose his path. He turned and ran. Directly in his path the open door of the fatal root-cellar loomed big and black, and into that door Boggs dived as a rabbit goes into his burrow.

Doris lay along the wall in that root-cellar, appalled at the uproar. She could not guess what it meant. She was frantic by the memory of what she had seen by that lightning flash. She could not get her arms loose. Carmelita had seen to that. She was utterly at the will of whoever came to take her. The wild uproar, the sudden explosion, the sight of murder done terrified her beyond speech. She cowered by the wall praying, breathless. What did it all mean?

A man stumbled down the steps. She heard him fall and curse and stumble again to his feet. That man was Boggs, though she did not know it. She heard the sharp click as the hammer of his six-gun was drawn back and she knew it for what it was. Then she heard the sharp staccato report as he fired at the door and, by the lick of red flame, she saw leap down the steps—Latigo Jones! Chris Boden! The man she had said she hated! The new trail-boss of the Lazy M and the Crutch J herds. The man who would not say who he was till he found out whether she was the kind of a girl he wanted to marry.

She started to call to him. But she knew that two men were in the place and she knew that war was on. If Latigo was there, the other man must be an enemy. If she called to him, he would answer her and his voice would betray him. His enemy could shoot him down. She bit her lips till the blood ran in a salty stream into

her mouth. Then she lay down along the log wall to wait.

The moment Latigo struck the floor he dropped. He knew his enemy would have the range to the door and he crouched low in the darkness. He must make Boggs divulge his position. Whoever could first locate his enemy would have the first chance. And Latigo knew well that there would be no second chance. He must make Boggs show where he was.

Without a sound he reached down and pulled off his left boot, then slipping his right hand to his left armpit, he unsheathed the long, weighted, deadly bowie-knife. With a quick movement he threw the boot to the far corner of the room. It struck the roof and bounced back to the floor and, before the echo died away, Boggs, falling into the trap, fired at the sound.

Latigo had planned for that split second of gun-flash. It came from the middle of the long wall on his left side, low down along the floor where Boggs crouched to be out of the line of possible gunfire. He did not know of that knife that was more deadly than any gun.

No shot came! Long before the powder sparks had died Latigo had seen. His right hand went up and back. There was a sharp whir, a dull thud, a choking grunt. Then a long, long, silence in the utter dark!

Doris could stand it no longer! Some one had died in that room. A soul had gone out in the dark! Who was it? Could it be Latigo? Chris Boden? The real Chris Boden? Her trembling voice broke the silence.

"Latigo," she cried brokenly. "Is that you, Latigo? For God's sake answer me."

An oath that was half a prayer answered her. Sam

Boggs with twenty guns could not have kept Latigo from striking a match. The moment the spark caught, he saw her, and heedless of what the room might hold, he sprang forward and lifted her to the door. The shot had brought a group of the Crutch J men to the door with lanterns. As Latigo cut the ropes loose from Doris's arms they could not believe their eyes.

"Who dared do that?" demanded Latigo.

"The woman Carmelita. She and Boggs took me and she locked me up! That man Boggs——"

"No use monkeyin' any more with Boggs or Biggs or whatever his name was," said Baker, who had been investigating on his own account. "Come here an' look. It looks like there's been a killin'-bee in here."

Chin Lee lay prone in that hole that he had dug and Lem Silas lay across him with a powder-burned face that told plainly what had taken place. Then they turned and looked at the instigator of it all—Biggs.

The great knife, thrown like a stone from a catapult and with deadly accuracy, had caught Biggs in the very act of rising to his feet and the needle-like point, driven by its weighted shaft, had gone straight as any bullet. The man was pinned by the throat to the wall of solid logs by the long blade that had gone through flesh and bones as a needle goes through cloth.

"I'd like to know the details, but they don't matter much," said Latigo grimly. "We've done what we started to do. We've got Doris back."

He realized that she was the only thing that really counted. Revenge for his dead father, for Shorty Burt, for the stampede of the herd, for all that had taken place was one thing. Doris was another. Yet—she had said she hated him.

"Tell me all that happened," said Doris weakly.

A dozen voices strove to tell her in perfect unison. The town was burned. Boggs was dead. The ex-trail-boss who had double-crossed them was dead and they had her back. Nothing else counted.

"Some of you get back at once," said Latigo. "And tell the herd-guard to cross at first daylight. The river'll be impassable soon. It'll be daylight in an hour."

The sudden storm had done its work and had gone its way. The men turned away to the ford to get the ferry-boat, but it was gone. Look Long gave a partial explanation.

"Yah! My sec ~~un~~ go. No want stop 'em. That no my pidgin. My pidgin knock hole in boat bottom. She no go ver' far. Carmelita go, too. She not go far. Bime by she go down to bottom of river. You want to ketch her? Can do."

He looked hopefully at Latigo, who shook his head.

"Let 'em all go to hell their own gait," he said. "Here comes old Baldy with the chuck-wagon."

It lurched up the slippery approach from the ferry, Baldy cursing his team with a blistering tongue.

"Tonkaway's all right," he shouted in answer to a question. "He's showed the first sense he's had fer two days. He asked for a drink. What's that?"

He climbed stiffly down from his box and motioned to the three figures the men had laid out by the door of the root-cellar.

"A I'l Chirk an'—by God! It's our old trail-boss! He leaned over Lem Silas. "An' this man Boggs!" Then he turned on Latigo: "It looks to me like ye

"drawin' cards," he said. "You sure got one low pair." His finger took in Boggs and Silas.


"Wrong!" Latigo slipped an arm about Doris—who hated him but who gave no sign. "I drew—Queen High. Any kick comin'?"

Baldy looked at him long and searchingly. "That damn Scalp Rock's been lifted right outen the river," he said. "Boggs is dead and our old trail-boss is dead. Shorty Burt's kicked in an' old Tonkaway's got no more sense'n a ground hog. An' I got a hole in my good 'paulin that you borrored," he said, accusingly. "Kin you darn it?"

"Ask my wife when we get to a preacher," said Latigo. "How about it?" He turned to Doris.

She said nothing, but her hand lay lightly on his arm and there was a light in her eyes that was not all hatred. Latigo, who was not more than average bright, might have missed it, but old Baldy Stone, after one brief look at them, moved to his jockey-box and dragged out a hidden bottle.

"This here bein' a special occasion," he said, "I'm tellin' you—if what I see is c'rect—that the Crutch J and the Lazy M will be united in th' holy bonds o' matrimony just as soon as we kin reach a preacher. In the meantime——" He tilted the gurgling bottle. "There's a drop er so left here an'—all good men will come to the party."

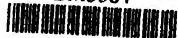
"There comes the herd an'— said Ann suddenly. "I'm done with rainmakin'."

Latigo turned to Doris, smilingly.

"Will you take half the (

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